

# How to Build a Perfect Backlink Profile

for the U.S. Real Estate, Law and Accounting Firms

SEMrush Study 2018

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#### 01. Introduction

The professional services industry continues to expand steadily and is expected to show a 5.4% growth rate from 2016 to 2020, according to the Professional Services Market Global Report 2017. Along with a strong demand for services like real estate, law, and accounting, competition between companies that work in these industries remains fierce. So how can your business succeed in a crowded marketplace?

Creating a solid backlink profile can give businesses the opportunity to improve their search engine rankings, raising visibility among their target audience. If any pages of your website are getting organic links from other reputable sources, those pages can rank higher in Google, as this factor remains one of strongest signals in its search algorithm. However, finding quality link sources can be a daunting venture.

For our brand new research, we analyzed the backlink profiles of the leading companies in three highly competitive industries in the U.S.: Real Estate, Legal Services, and Accounting. The results of the study helped us discover the most popular and the most reputable domains that link back to the sites we analyzed.

We hope that the insights provided in this research will help companies find valuable backlink sources, make data-informed decisions, and adjust their link building strategy accordingly to accomplish their business goals.

## 02. Methodology

We analyzed the websites of over 2,000 firms working in the **real estate**, **legal services**, and **accounting** industries. For our research we used lists of the leading U.S. companies in these industries, according to the popular niche rankings. We then found over 60,000 referring domains that link back to these companies.

Using the SEMrush data, we looked at the backlink profiles of the real estate, law, and accounting firms to lift the veil on their link building secrets.

First, we selected referring domains that link back to over 50% of the companies analyzed in each industry. Next, we wanted to identify both the most reputable and most popular referring domains for each industry. For this purpose, we used two different approaches.

# Approach #1: Identifying the most reputable referring domains

To determine the authority of the referring domains we used our Authority Score metric. Since not all links are equal, website owners must pay careful attention to the domains they get their links from.

Authority Score measures the overall quality of a domain and is based on the following SEMrush data:

- Backlink data including referring domains, follow and nofollow links<sup>1</sup>, Domain Score<sup>2</sup>, Trust Score<sup>3</sup>, and more
- Organic search data including organic search traffic and positions
- Website traffic data

This compound metric helps to understand how valuable a backlink from a referring domain is to your website's SEO, or how beneficial a new backlink would be from a domain that you are hoping to get a link from.

<sup>1</sup> Follow links are links that instruct search engine crawlers to follow the linked-to website and thus communicate trust to it. Meanwhile, nofollow links send users to another site if clicked on, but tell search bots not to crawl the link.

<sup>2</sup> **Domain Score** measures the importance of a domain based on the **volume of links** pointing back to the domain. Volume represents link "weight," or the cumulative number of backlinks pointing to the page that points to the target page. It is calculated similar to the way Google PageRank was calculated.

<sup>3</sup> **Trust Score** places more emphasis on **high-quality backlinks** and measures the trustworthiness of a webpage or domain based on the number of links coming from **highly trusted websites**. If the Trust Score of your domain is much lower than its Domain Score, it can be a sign that your website has too many low-quality backlinks

The authority and quality of a website is highly important, since earning links from a good domain serves as a solid trust endorsement for your site and can boost your SEO efforts. On the other hand, receiving links from sources with low authority will do you no good or can even hurt your site, in terms of SEO.

To explore backlink profiles of the leading industry companies and check the authority of referring domains, we used SEMrush's group of Backlink Analytics reports.

# Approach #2: Identifying the most popular referring domains

To identify the most popular link sources, we looked at how many of the analyzed corporate websites have backlinks from the listed referring domains. The most popular domains were defined as domains that were referring to most of the websites analyzed. In the following, we use the term **Matches** to denote the percentage of the companies that a particular domain links to. For example, a domain with 90% Matches would mean that this domain links to 90% of the companies analyzed.

To find out which domains the companies get their backlinks from, and their Matches, we used SEMrush's Backlink Gap.

To make an informed decision when searching for potential backlink sources, it is important to understand how much traffic these link building prospects get, in addition to their authority and popularity. For this reason, we also looked at the estimated monthly traffic of each referring domain. As we were analyzing U.S. firms, we considered only U.S. traffic during February 2018. Estimated monthly traffic data was taken from SEMrush's Traffic Analytics reports.

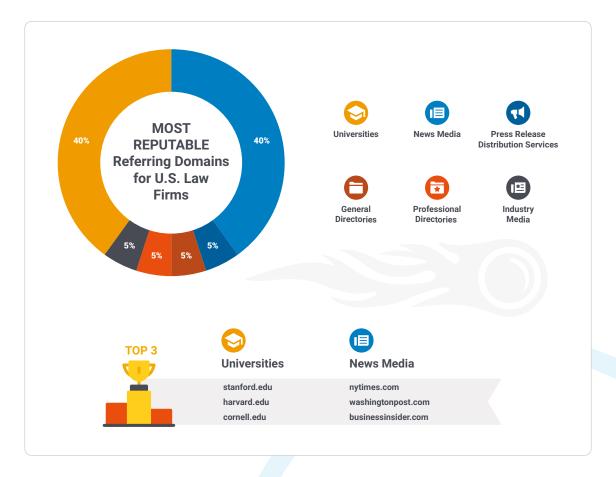
Now let's dive deep into our findings ...

### 03. Research Findings

#### **Legal Services**

We looked at backlink profiles of the leading law firms in the U.S. and discovered where the backlinks for these companies are coming from.

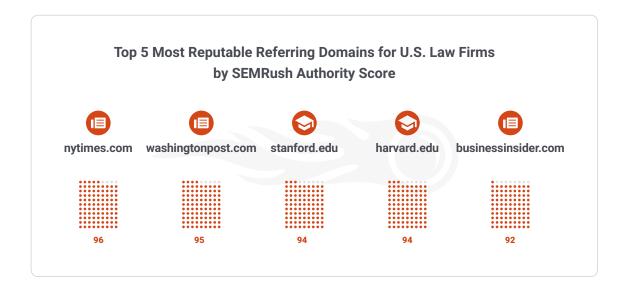
First, we identified the most reputable referring domains, based on their Authority Scores.



#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

Among the most reputable domains, news media and universities appeared to be the
main link sources for legal services firms — each of them accounts for 40% of all domains
from the top 20 list. These categories are followed by industry media, local directories,
professional directories, and press release distribution services, each of them accounting
for 5% of all the domains.

- · Generally, backlinks placed on university websites come from the lists of alumni, including their current job positions and their company news.
- The high percentage of universities among the most reputable linking domains can point to the fact that the leading law firms are closely connected to the academic communities of lawyers.
- Over 60% of industry leaders have backlinks from each of the most reputable domains, which is reflected in a strong online presence of law firms. If most of your rivals have backlinks from these domains, you can also try to acquire a link from these resources to keep up with the competition.



Download the complete list of the top 20 most reputable domains (XLS)



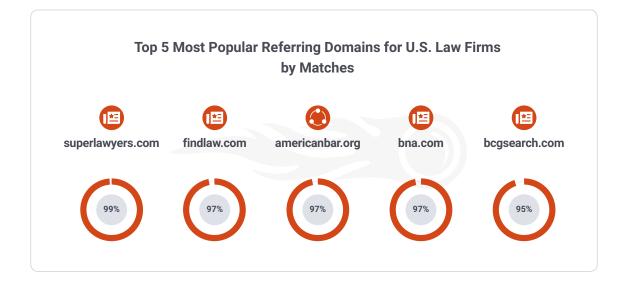
As for the most popular referring domains and their categories, we see a whole new picture.



#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- Industry media, professional directories, and professional associations prevail among the top 20 most popular referring domains.
- It seems that the leading industry players put their efforts into building a solid online presence — the absolute majority (80-99%) of the leading law firms have backlinks to their websites on these domains.

Industry media, professional directories, and professional associations have lower
Authority Scores and less overall traffic compared to the domains unrelated to a specific
industry, such as news media and general directories. Nevertheless, traffic from these
industry-specific link sources is highly targeted and they are high value in terms of PR
and brand awareness in a certain niche. To position yourself as an industry specialist,
it's crucial to be mentioned on these web resources, which are closely related to your
business.



Download the complete list of the top 20 most reputable domains (XLS)

#### **Real Estate**

We analyzed the backlink profiles of the leading real estate firms in the U.S., looking at referring domains that link back to these companies.

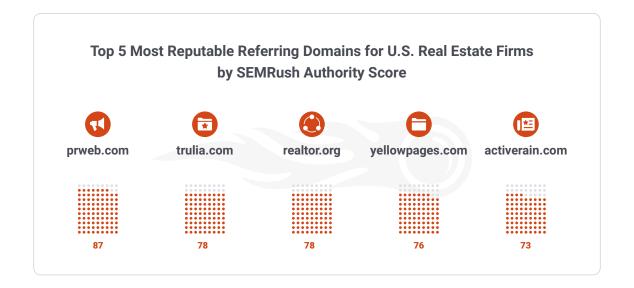
First, we selected the top referring domains with the highest Authority Scores.



#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The most reputable referring domains for real estate include general directories, professional directories and listings, and industry media, which have high Authority Scores and can pass a lot of link juice to a company's website:
  - General directories. Web portals and business directories similar to the yellow pages, which provide a list of businesses within a specific location. In addition to high value in terms of SEO, being listed on the local directories is critically important for real estate firms, as customers often make their choice based on the location when choosing a company or an agent.

- Professional directories and listings. Mostly listings and various ratings of real estate firms divided into categories based on the service provided, ratings of agents and brokers, and listings of real estate properties for sale or rent.
- Industry media. Mentions on niche web portals and in industry news.
- When it comes to professional associations, the firms get their links from the lists of association members and news about companies' participation in association activity.
- Unlike companies from the two other niches we analyzed, real estate firms don't have backlinks from university websites, which can be explained by the fact that real estate is less connected to academic communities than companies in the legal and accounting industries.



Download the complete list of the top 20 most reputable domains (XLS)



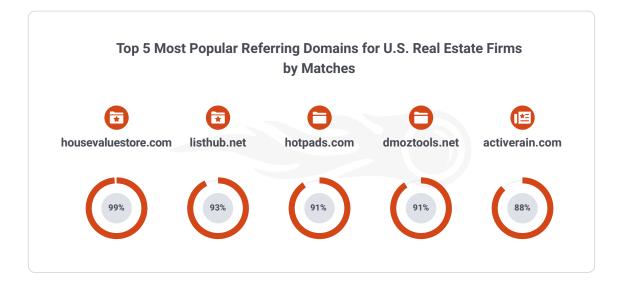
When analyzing referring domains, it's important to pay attention not only to their authority, but also their popularity among your rivals. That's why we also selected referring domains that link back to most of the real estate company websites we analyzed.



#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- In the real estate industry, the most reputable referring domains do not equate to the
  most popular referring domains. Their categories are the same and include general
  and professional directories, industry media, press-release distribution services, and
  professional associations. However, there are many differences between the referring
  domains in the two lists. New portals and listings appear in the list of the most popular
  domains.
- The most popular referring domains might not impress you with high Authority Score and enormous overall traffic volume. However, since they are closely related to the industry and attract a highly relevant audience, they can provide more targeted traffic.
- Assuming that over 60% of all analyzed real estate firms are already present on these
  referring domains, they can be considered an "easier" backlink target. If most of your rivals
  could gain backlinks from these domains, you can probably also do so.

Among professional associations, there is only one association that had enough matches
and authority to get to the top domains list — realtor.org. 68% of real estate firms are
mentioned on this site and it has a fairly high Authority Score — 78 out of 100.



Download the complete list of the top 20 most reputable domains (XLS)



#### **Accounting**

To determine the backlink portfolio of the accounting companies, we analyzed the leading accounting firms in the U.S. and uncovered referring domains where these companies have backlinks pointing to their websites.



#### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- The results of our study showed that a typical backlink profile of the leading accounting
  firms includes links from industry media, news media and business media, professional
  associations, general directories and universities.
- Unlike the case with the two other industries, the most reputable domains coincide with the most popular domains for the accounting companies.
- We found out that few accounting firms share backlinks from the same domain. According
  to our findings, only 20% of the analyzed accounting firms have backlinks from each
  referring domain that we found. Only three of these domains link to over 50% of the
  accounting firms. Because of this, we lowered the popularity threshold (Matches) to 16%
  and selected the top 20 most popular referring domains that link back to 16% or more of
  the companies analyzed.

- A relatively low level of Matches can point to the fact that there is a huge diversity of link sources in the accounting industry - only a few companies have backlinks from the same domain. Although earning backlinks from these domains can be challenging, it can provide tremendous potential for link building - by placing a few more backlinks on some of the top domains you can improve your chances of outdistancing your competitors.
- When it comes to professional associations, they usually link to the lists of companies and company news, e.g., news about sponsorships.



Download the complete list of the top 20 most reputable domains (XLS)



# 04. What It Means to You as a Marketing Specialist

Backlinks can be a good source of highly targeted traffic to your website. However, not all backlinks are created equal. When planning your link building strategy, it can be difficult to determine which domains you need to target to acquire backlinks. The results of our research suggest several key factors worth paying attention to when choosing potential backlink partners.

#### Things to keep in mind

- It's worth checking for web resources that link to most of your competitors but not you.
   Use those domains as a link building opportunity and try to reach out to those potential backlink partners to acquire high-quality links.
- By analyzing your competitors' backlink profiles and strategies they are using you can
  better understand what works and what doesn't in your industry and think about whether
  or not you can apply those tactics to your own business.
- Domains related to your industry, such as industry media, professional directories, and professional associations, are a great place for your backlinks, which can benefit your website in terms of SEO and brand awareness.
- It's crucial to pay attention to the quality of potential link sources, looking at metrics
  like Authority Score and a website's traffic. You can search for domains that have high
  Authority Scores and good traffic flow, but link back to just a few of your rivals. These
  websites can serve as fresh link building opportunities you can seize to occupy those
  unfilled niches and keep ahead of the competition.
- A backlink is considered to be more valuable when it comes from a relevant domain. Let's
  say your company provides legal services it may look suspicious if an online jewelry
  store links back to you. Conversely, if a link comes from a relevant source it's more likely to
  be clicked.
- Another thing Google pays attention to is the diversity of a backlink profile. A diverse
  backlink portfolio means that you use varied anchor texts, have different types of
  backlinks (e.g. text and image links) from different referring domains (news sites, blogs,
  etc.), and find the right balance between follow and nofollow links. Without diversity,
  Google may assume you are using manipulative schemes.
- Make sure to diversify your link sources. If the search engine sees too many links coming
  to your site from a single website, it may flag this as a suspicious sign.

In the next part of this e-book, we'll show you how the SEMrush reports and tools can help you perform different link building activities, so that you can skyrocket your SEO results.

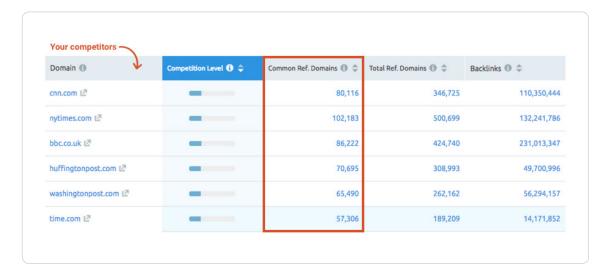
# **05. Eight Steps to Unbeatable Link Building with SEMrush**

In this part, we'll describe several key steps of the link building process and show you how SEMrush can help you effectively perform these tasks so that you can pave the way to acquiring high-quality backlinks for your website.

#### 1. Discover your backlink competitors

#### **TOOL TO USE: BACKLINK ANALYTICS**

To beat the competition, first you need to understand who you're competing with. With the help of our Backlink Analytics, you can pinpoint your rivals. The Competitors report within this section will show you a list of competitive domains which have a similar backlink profile to your own website.



In addition to the total number of referring domains that link back to your rivals, you'll be able to see how many domains link back both to your and your competitor's website.

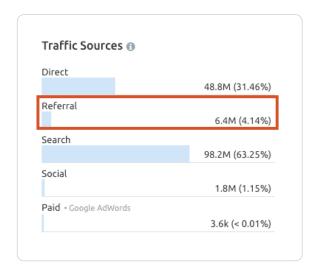
By default, the results will be listed by the competition level based on how closely your and your rival's domain compete with each other. For your convenience, you can sort them by the number of common referring domains, the total number of domains that link back to your competitor, and the total number of their backlinks.

Discover your competitors ->

#### 2. Narrow down your findings

#### **TOOL TO USE: TRAFFIC ANALYTICS**

Not only can you identify your backlink competitors, you can also analyze the amount of traffic they get per month. Traffic Analytics allows you to dive deep into the traffic that's going to their websites. With the help of the tool, you'll be able to understand which sources are generating the most traffic for your rivals, whom you've found with Backlink Analytics. In the Overview report, you can determine how much of the traffic is referral traffic.



Referring Sites 2,591 Search Engines 25 | Social Networks 13 Domain 🙃 Traffic 1 Traffic Share 1 C 1,332,109 20.72% ď 592,342 9.21% ď 250,607 3.90% - 2 127,266 1.98% C<sup>7</sup> 101,448 1.58% If you see that some of your competitors get quite a large amount of traffic coming to their site through hyperlinks, you might want to take a closer look at those websites and their link building strategies. Maybe there's something you can learn from those competitors.

In the Traffic Sources tab, you can analyze which relationships your rivals have with other websites by viewing the amount of traffic gathered from a particular domain and the total amount of traffic share attributed to this domain.

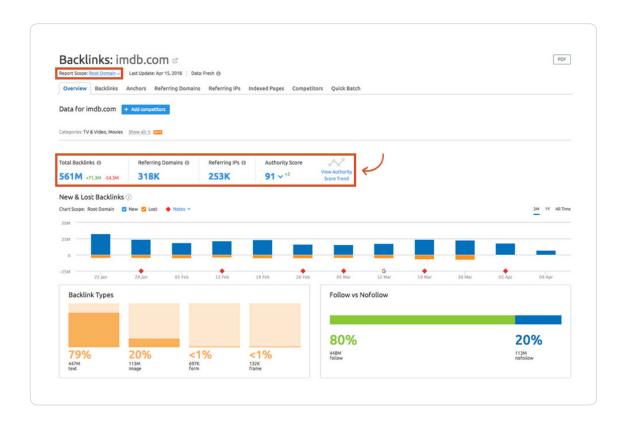
With these insights, you can try to reach out to the domains that are sending your competitors the most traffic and offer them some valuable information on your site that your rivals may not have. If appropriate, you can then ask them for links to your site, so that you can start building your backlink portfolio.

View competitors' traffic sources

#### 3. Analyze your main competitors in detail

#### **TOOL TO USE: BACKLINK ANALYTICS**

Now that you know which websites you should keep an eye on, you can start collecting deeper insights into their link building tactics. The Backlink Analytics section provides you with information about the overall backlink profile size of your competitors, their key link partnerships, their most recently built links, the distribution of follow and nofollow links, and more.



You can change a report scope to view and analyze backlinks pointing to a domain, a specific subdomain, or a specific URL.

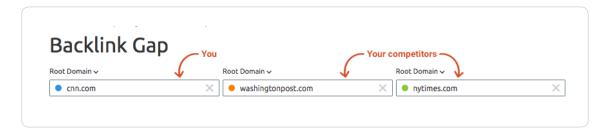
Another helpful feature of this report is the New & Lost Backlinks graph, which allows you to discover both how many new backlinks other companies in your niche have built recently (the "New" checkbox) and how many links they used to have but lost for some reason (the "Lost" checkbox). This information will help you better understand if you should aim your efforts at catching up with your competition. Maybe you're missing out on some link building opportunities. On the other hand, your competitors' lost links can show you some potential backlink partners you can try to reach out to in order to get the desired link for your site.

Perform a deep link analysis 🔷

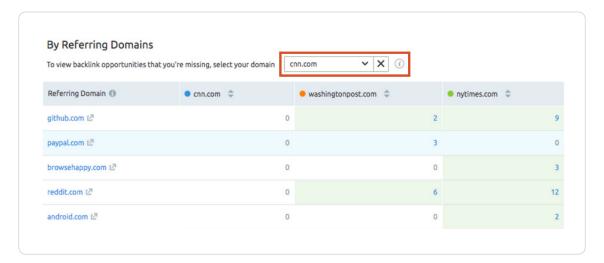
#### 4. Spot the backlink gap in your profile

#### **TOOL TO USE: BACKLINK GAP**

Once you've identified your main backlink rivals, you can head to the Backlink Gap tool to compare your and their backlink profiles. You can enter up to five competing domains, including your website. You can then compare your link portfolio to those of your main rivals and search for new backlink opportunities for your website.



You'll be able to see all of the referring domains that send backlinks to the websites entered. To view some potential backlink opportunities that you might be missing out on, select your domain in the drop-down menu above the table. Once you've done it, you'll get a list of domains your competitors are getting links from but you are not.



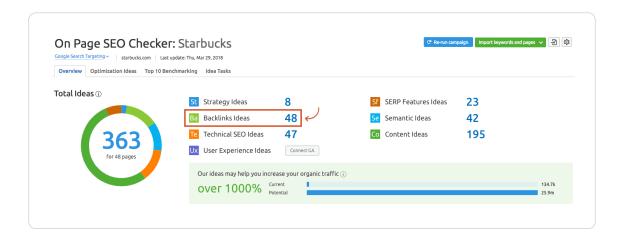
Conduct a thorough link analysis of these websites to identify the most authoritative backlink sources that link back to your rivals but not you. Use those referring domains as your link building targets.



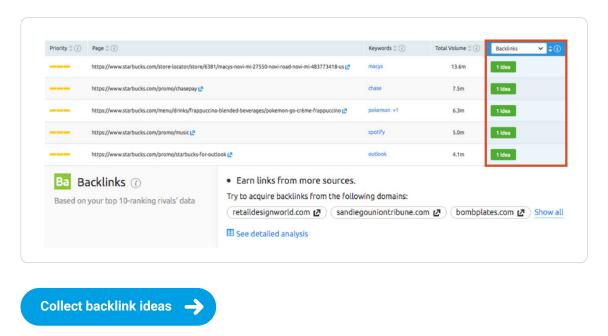
#### 5. Explore fresh backlink opportunities

#### **TOOL TO USE: ON PAGE SEO CHECKER**

To maximize your SEO efforts, you can use actionable on-page optimization ideas provided by our On Page SEO Checker tool. Once you've adjusted all the required settings, you can view a number of suggestions for your strategy, including link building ideas based on the backlinks of your top competitors. These recommendations are given for particular webpages and are divided into several categories according to their type.



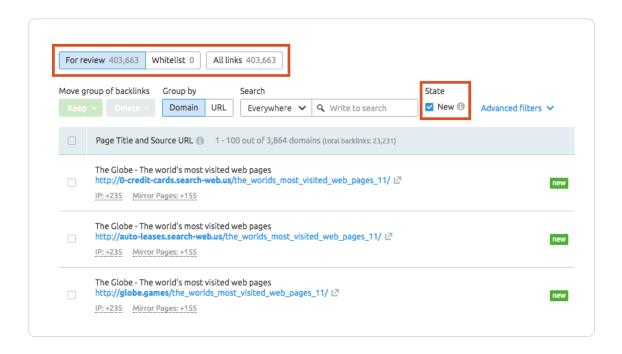
Check out backlink ideas to discover outreach targets you can use to build up your backlink profile. You'll see a list of domains that are recommended for backlink placement and compiled based on the backlink placements of your top 10 competing websites.



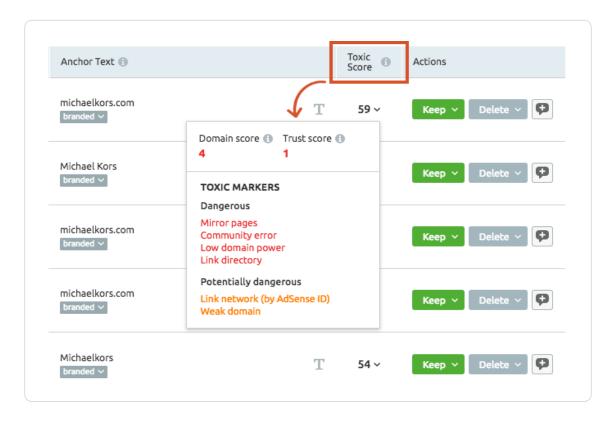
#### 6. Maintain your backlink profile in good shape

#### **TOOL TO USE: BACKLINK AUDIT**

Besides spotting new link building opportunities, it's also important to protect your website from penalties and sanctions. In the Audit report of the tool, you can view all your backlinks broken down into three lists: For review, Whitelist, and All links. Initially, there will be an equal number of links in the For review and All links lists. As you work on your backlink profile, the former list will be decreasing. You can see which of these backlinks are new by clicking on the New checkbox.



By default, the Backlink Audit tool sorts the toxic backlinks in order of Toxic Score, which helps to determine which of your links are the most dangerous for your site and is based on a scale of 0 to 100, with 100 being extremely toxic. Currently, there are over 50 different toxicity markers that SEMrush uses to determine the Toxic Score for a link. Backlinks with the highest Toxic Score will be shown on the first page of the report. Once you've clicked on the Toxic Score value, you'll be able to see the list of toxicity markers associated with this link.



If a backlink has a low Toxic Score and appears to be fine, then you can decide to send the domain or URL to your Whitelist. If you see a link that appears to have a dangerous Toxic Score you can either contact the owner of the site and ask them to remove the link (or change it) or send the harmful link to your disavow list. A disavow list can be sent to Google so that the links can be disassociated with your website.

Keep your backlink profile neat 🔷

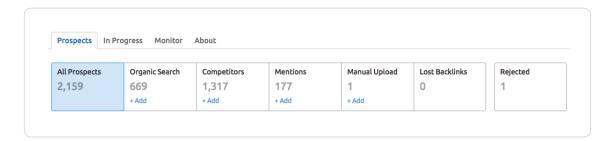
# 7. Determine prospective backlinks and reach out to potential link partners

#### **TOOL TO USE: LINK BUILDING TOOL**

Acquiring high-quality, relevant links is not an easy task. That's why we've developed the Link Building tool, which covers the three main steps of the link building workflow:

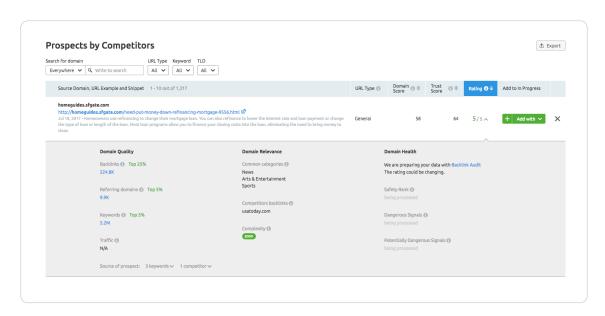
#### 1. FINDING RELEVANT LINK SOURCES

The tool will suggest potential link prospects that you should get backlinks from. They are all divided into categories according to the source of information the tool uses when compiling a list of those prospects:



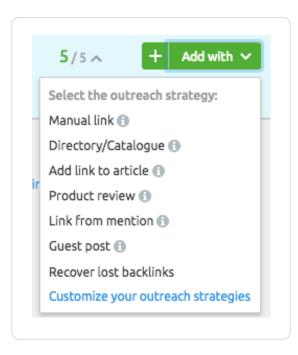
The category titled Rejected contains prospects that you do not wish to work with.

The prospects are listed in order of their Rating, which is based on multiple factors. The higher this Rating, the higher the value of the backlinks that can be obtained from this domain.



Collect the information on those prospects to see which of them seem like a good target.

#### 2. REACHING OUT TO POTENTIAL PARTNERS

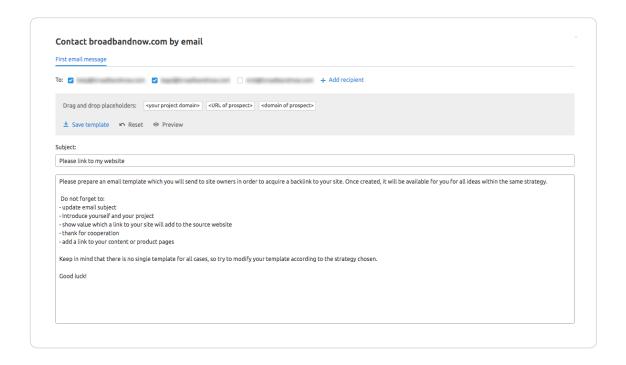


Now that you have decided which prospects you'd like to work with, you can start the outreach process. You can send a prospect to the "In Progress" list with one of the link building strategies applied.

Each of these strategies defines the conditions on which you offer your link to be placed on the domain of a chosen prospect. Once you've clicked "Send" you will be prompted to the email wizard and given access to the template. You can connect the Link Building tool to your Gmail account to send and track emails directly from the tool.

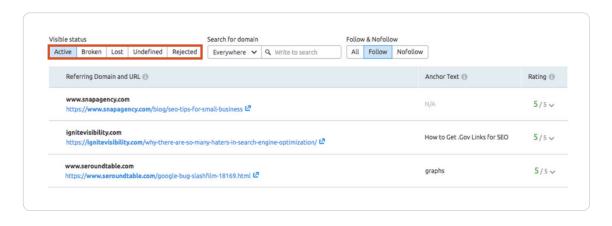
Our tool will automate the wizard with default information, but you can customize the template to your needs. It will also pull out the contact details of the website for

you, to save you time. When working with the Link Building tool, you can create your perfect pitch, save your email as a template, and personalize your letters for different prospects.



#### 3. MONITORING YOUR PROGRESS

Don't forget to keep track of your progress after you start working with the prospects. You'll be able to see if the backlink is visible on the selected referring domain and the backlink status: **Active, Broken, Lost,** and **Undefined**.



Start earning backlinks ->

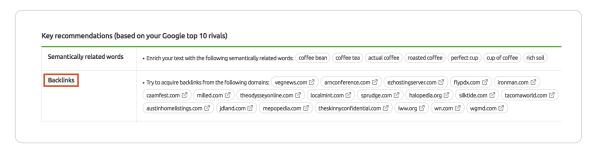
#### 8. Find more backlink ideas for your future content

#### **TOOL TO USE: SEO CONTENT TEMPLATE**



If creating content is a part of your optimization efforts, SEO Content Template is the perfect way to ensure your future content will be SEO-friendly. The tool provides you with insights and specific recommendations for generating new content to improve your SEO status. The suggestions are based on content of the top 10 ranking pages (which are called "rivals" in the tool) and include potential backlink targets, which are domains you can try to acquire backlinks from. Once you've entered a keyword or a group of keywords you'd like to rank for, you can start collecting ideas.

Along with other recommendations, the tool will generate a list of domains that are worth trying to earn backlinks from to make your upcoming content SEO-friendly.



Use these domains as prospects for link building opportunities.





If you would like to collect the same data on backlink profiles among companies in your industry, send an email to <a href="mailto:backlinkprofile@semrush.com">backlinkprofile@semrush.com</a> and we will contact you as soon as possible!

semrush.com