



Episode 8: How NOT to Respond to a Google Warning and Tips for Avoiding Penalties

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Hey everybody, welcome to episode 8 of my podcast. I cannot believe this year is over. I swear I just said Happy New Year and now it's time to say it again. Isn't that crazy? Anyway, I'm going to be talking about Google link penalties, Google warnings, what to do if you receive one and how to hopefully avoid them.

I've actually received a link warning or an unnatural link warning in the past, and I want to help you guys understand how to deal with that if you get one and obviously the best thing to do is to prevent it altogether. This was a couple of years ago, I was actually in Vegas at the time. Don't ask me why I had my laptop open on Google Webmaster tools when I'm in Vegas. It's that whole entrepreneur thing where we feel like we have to take our laptops everywhere, but that's a whole other story.

Anyway, I was checking my Google Webmaster tools account and I saw a notification and I was like, what is this? I don't remember the wording but it said something to the effect of "There are some things that you're doing that are against the Google guidelines. We

are not going to penalize your site or your entire site, but this is a warning. You may want to correct it as soon as possible,” or something to that effect.

Now, anybody who knows me knows I am always on my blog, on YouTube talking about how you can't do these link building schemes and I'm not a fan of manual link building, so I'm thinking to myself, you've got to be kidding me. Me, an unnatural link notice? What's up with this? So I immediately went on the defense. I submitted what they call a reconsideration request, which is what you do when you get any type of link warning or any type of manual penalty. So I'm sitting in my hotel room typing up the reconsideration request when I should be out partying somewhere, and I basically said, Google I don't understand what's going on. This must be some mistake, I don't do any unnatural link building. I may cross-link my sites from time to time but that's because they're related and all this, and then I hit send.

A couple of days later, I get a stock reply and there is nothing worse than a stock reply when you're upset about something. It's kind of like when you're having an argument with someone and they respond very calmly, and you're like on ten and they're on level two, and that makes you even more frustrated. So I got this stock reply that basically said, “We're sorry but we're still finding your site in violation of our guidelines. Please check our terms blah, blah, blah.” Really Google, really? I was like, what is going on? So I waited a few days and I submitted another reconsideration request; same tone, very defensive, sort of arrogant I will admit, like how dare you penalize me, blah, blah, blah. Same response, so I thought okay Lisa, this isn't working. You've got to figure out what's causing this penalty.

So I changed my entire tune. I sent another reconsideration request but this time, I was a lot more reasonable and nicer. I basically said, “Dear Google or dear spam team, I received the unnatural link warning and it would be great if you could send me some examples of what is causing this notification. I've combed through my site, I don't really know what could be causing this so if you could give me any insight, that would be great.”

Well it turns out, that was the trick. A human actually responded to me. It was somebody that worked on the Google spam team and they basically said, here are some things that could be wrong and one of the items was cross-linking your websites together. I thought, this is kinda silly, my sites are related because I often would link my forum website Babble to 2create and vice versa, because they are related websites. I thought this is crazy, so I can't even link my websites together. I'm not doing this for link juice purposes or to manipulate Google. I'm doing this just because it makes sense for my audience.

So what I did was I took all of my links that were pointing to my sites like the cross-links, and I added a no-follow tag. The no-follow tag just tells Google, ignore this link from a link building perspective. I'm not trying to pass my existing sites PageRank, which is a measurement that Google uses to determine the value of links that point to your site. I'm not using these links to influence PageRank or ranking; it's just a link, so that's exactly what I did.

I combed through the Webmaster guidelines and made sure I wasn't violating anything else, and I sent another reconsideration request. Again, much better tone. "Dear Google spam team, I appreciate Google's efforts to clean up spam on the web" blah blah blah, you know totally brown nosing, and I mentioned the things that I did. Sure enough, within a week I got a reply and they said that the penalty had been removed. What's interesting about this penalty is, I did not notice any drop in traffic directly from this penalty nor did I notice a traffic gain after the penalty was released. I was reading that that was very common, so what had seemed to me is that Google was basically sending out these penalties more or less to kind of scare people or intimidate them.

This is where I'm on the fence you guys, because I understand Google's plight. I get that spam is a huge problem, and it's not as bad as it was but it was really bad a couple of years ago. They have to take action, I get that. But I just feel that the way that they go about it sometimes is very, very intimidating and it's confusing. So if you were never going to penalize my site, then what was the purpose of the notice and what was the purpose of removing the penalty? It didn't really make sense to me.

So Matt Cutts put out a video around this time and he basically said, we've just sent out a bunch of unnatural link notices to various website owners. There were two groups; the first group was for the people we just don't trust, the site's new, you don't have a lot of relevant links pointing to your site, looks like you're doing something shady. These people will probably lose traffic. Then there's the other group of sites that are more reputable, that we tend to trust but they might be doing a couple of things that are questionable. I was in that group and I know this because he read the notification on the video, and that was the exact notification that I received. I was in the group where I wasn't getting penalized, but it was more like a heads up "Hey, we don't like this."

As I said, it's such a fine line with Google. I really have this love-hate relationship with them. On one accord, you don't want them to control your life but at the same token, you want to keep the traffic that you have. It's easy to say don't worry about Google, and I know I say that sometimes. You don't want to obsess over everything Google does, but at the same time you still want to keep the traffic that you have, so it's this fine line that you have to walk with Search Engine Optimization.

Now I want to talk about how to stay abreast of all this. First thing I would recommend is to create a Google Webmaster tools account. Hopefully you already have this, it's very easy. Just go to [Google.com/webmasters](https://www.google.com/webmasters) and set up your account. You have to verify your website and from there, you can keep track of anything that's going on with your site. Google will notify you and if there's something going on, not just with links but with anything; there might be some crawl errors or there might be some excessive 404 not found errors. It's just something every person with a website should have.

If you're going to link your websites together, I would recommend using the no-follow tag. It's very easy to implement. If you just Google no-follow tag, there's help out there on how to set it up, but you really just put `rel=nofollow` inside your link code. As I said earlier, that just tells Google to ignore this link from a page rank or link building perspective.

Third, if you use forums and you post to forums and you have your site in your signature, just be aware that generally this is okay, but if you have a new site and you suddenly get excessive amounts of links from forums, that can send up a red flag with Google. I know people that have gotten penalized or notifications for their forum signatures, and then I know people who have never gotten notified so it just really depends. I think the biggest thing is, Google really scrutinizes newer websites. If they see a lot of links coming into a brand new website, that looks unnatural. So if you join a forum and you post 500 posts in 2 weeks and you have your signature in the forum, that could potentially send up a red flag with Google because it looks like you've just obtained a bunch of links very quickly.

Now some people have said that in the last couple of years, Google has calmed down on this, but again if you want to be safe, just remember that. To me, it's more about the velocity of the links or the speed at which you gain the links, as opposed to the number of links. I think that's why some people get notifications because they gain a lot of links too quickly. I actually link to my blog on my forum in the signature. What's interesting about my situation is and I've talked about this before in another podcast, my blog and main site are really 2 different sites. It's a long story. Obviously it's better to have one site but again, that's another podcast.

My blog has never gotten a lot of organic traffic, so I'm not as concerned about any penalties. If they penalize me, it's not going to make that much of a difference, so I don't care about that. That's why I have my blog in my forum signature, it's not a concern to me. That's the beauty of not relying completely on Google. You don't have to worry about every little thing, but my main site gets more organic traffic because it's older and because when people tend to link to my site, they link to 2createawebsite.com, so all that link juice is passed to that site. What I should have done when I created my blog was to create that on a folder instead of a sub-domain. Again, that's a whole other podcast because Google treats those sites as 2 separate sites. As I said, I'm not concerned about any penalties with my blog because there's not much to penalize, to be honest. I draw the majority of my blog traffic through my email

list and social media.

The other thing you want to do when you're writing your content is to vary up your anchor text. So if you're trying to rank your site for dog training keywords and you have links within your site to other pages on your site, you don't want to just use the same keyword all the time. You want to vary it up and make it look natural. Same thing with your content; you always want to just write naturally instead of putting the same keyword over and over again, because that could also trigger some kind of penalty.

The other thing you want to do is keep abreast of your link report inside Google Webmaster Tools. Google will keep you updated on who is linking to your website. This is where I have to have a ton of disclaimers, because this is one of those things that can drive you bonkers if you let it, because there are sites out there called scraper sites. Scraper sites are like bots, they just comb the web for content and then they publish them on a site. These aren't humans that are physically copying your site, it's all done by a bot. So it creates sometimes duplicate content of your site, it creates back links to your site and then you'll go to Google Webmaster tools and you go, where is this link coming from? A lot of times, it's the scraper sites.

You don't have to worry about those. Google has gotten a lot smarter and they can determine or verify that that's a bot, so they tend to ignore those links. But if you see a strange link from a porn site or something that just doesn't look like, you might want to take advantage of Google Disavow tool, and again you can Google it and figure out how to use this. You basically just tell Google, hey ignore this link from this site. This tool was first introduced a couple of year ago when people started getting penalties for doing all these different linking schemes, so they wanted a way to be able to tell Google, hey I may have bought this link from this site or I used this linking scheme and I don't want Google to count these links anymore. So Google introduced that tool to help people discount those links.

As I said, I debated whether or not to do this podcast on this subject because I know it's going to happen. You guys are going to

come to the blog and I encourage you if you have questions, to go to 2createawebsite.com/podcast8 if you want to leave a question or comment. But I know some of you are probably going to wonder, oh my goodness, should I disavow this link, should I no-follow all the links inside my site? What about affiliate links? As I said, there's this fine line with Google. You don't want them to control your life and control every aspect of your site, but at the same time you still want to be able to keep the traffic that you have and you don't want any penalties, right?

I do think Google has gotten a lot better at penalizing the real spammers versus those who are not or maybe they just made a couple of mistakes. I don't think you have to be as paranoid as you were or maybe had to be a couple of years ago, but at the same time you don't want to do anything obviously wrong. Of course, you don't want to repeat keywords in your content all the time, you don't want to do any linking schemes where you do a link exchange with someone or a bunch of different people.

There are some people out there that think link exchanges are still okay in moderation, and if you feel that's going to be valuable for you, fine. But I'm not one who really believes in link exchanges. Here's my thought on that. Usually people who want to do link exchanges are two people who don't have a lot of traffic, so you've got two people with no traffic both linking to each other. In my opinion, I don't see any value in link exchanges unless it's just a natural thing where two people happen to admire each others' sites and they are naturally mentioning them in their blog posts, but it's not a controlled thing where somebody says, I'm going to link to you on this page and you link to me on this page. I just think in today's times, that's usually a waste of time. Natural links are one thing, but this whole controlled link exchange from two sites that have no traffic, I just think it's a waste of time for the most part.

So the moral of the podcast is to diversify. I'm sure a lot of you knew that's what I was going to say. Let me tell you what was so rewarding for me last month. When I launched that Spreadshirt podcast, that was my most successful podcast to date in terms of the number of downloads in those first couple of days. You guys really, really seemed to dig that podcast, so that made me feel

good.

But what made me feel even better was, I had a handful of people let me now that they purchased my Photoshop course because of that podcast. What's so rewarding about that is, I got sales for a product and it had nothing to do with Google whatsoever. If you're listening to this podcast now, you probably found out about it because you're on my email list or you follow me on social media, or you're already subscribed to iTunes. None of those actions involve Google at all, so it's a very rewarding feeling to see that income come in and it's not a result of Google. That's what you all should be striving for.

We all know that Google traffic is great; it is. It converts really well and I never take it for granted, but you can't rely on it. That's what's so wonderful about having a YouTube channel and having a podcast, because you can have these other traffic streams out here that are generating income for you, and they're not relying on Google ... YouTube I guess technically is because it's owned by Google, but podcasting, social media, all those other ways that you can drive traffic to your site without using Google, and that should be all of our goals, to get better at diversification.

I hope you found this podcast helpful, but what I don't want is to create this paranoia. So if you're following the Google guidelines and you're not doing anything crazy or unnatural, you should be okay for the most part. Google is not perfect, they do make mistakes sometimes where you may get penalized for things that you may feel you shouldn't get penalized for. Unfortunately we can't control that as website owners, that's why you have to diversify.

So if you have any questions, I'd be more than happy to help you or answer them. Go to 2createawebsite.com/podcast8 and I'll be there to answer your questions. If you want to listen to previous episodes of my podcast, you can go to 2createawebsite.com/podcast and also if you need help, check out the forums at websitebabble.com. Have a wonderful, wonderful Holiday everyone. Thanks so much for listening and I'll talk to you next year.