

Surfers go online mainly to find information. If you can satisfy that need then you will increase your traffic, enhance your brand, and acquire and retain more customers. The catch is that your content—whether free on your site, distributed elsewhere gratis, or sold as an informational product—has to be killer content that's valuable in the eyes of consumers. Entrepreneur.com's Tim Knox [2004] says information is the best product to sell online for the following reasons:

- It's fast to create, fast to market.
- There's no inventory to stock.
- The start-up costs are low.
- There's an automated sales and delivery process.
- Customers get immediate access or delivery.
- There are no shipping and handling charges.

Not every online business is looking toward creating and distributing information products as a revenue stream, however. Many webmasters are more interested in using the strategy to enhance their brand with visitors and with their peers. Top-notch content is also extremely effective as a marketing tool to generate traffic for your site.

The branding and marketing applications are actually complementary: "Articles establish you as an expert in the marketplace, build inbound links to your sites, pre-sell your products, and help you rank higher in the search engines for your targeted keywords." [Crawford 2006] Beckart [2005] summarizes the seven key benefits of writing articles and publishing them online:

- Resource box. The short paragraph about the author included at the bottom of the published article is an opportunity to brand yourself, your business, and your website.
- Inbound links. Every time your article is published there should be a live link to your website in the resource box. Include important keywords in the link text for extra points with the search engines.
- Building credibility. Articles help establish your expertise. It's easier to gain a prospective client's trust when you have this credibility. Prospects that trust you are more likely to make a purchase.
- Receptive audience. People who receive the e-zines containing your articles are voluntarily pre-selected because they're interested in the particular topics you're writing about.
- Exposure. When your article is sent out to a publisher's list, it's an excellent result of your efforts. Also, many publishers place current articles on their homepage, later archiving them.
- Leverage. You have content that you can leverage when you write articles. Whatever you write can be used for multiple purposes. Search engines look favorably on new content.
- Viral marketing. Allow e-zine publishers to include your articles in their free e-books, as long as your resource box is included. Since these are being given away, your ad multiplies.

The practical application is straightforward—you write (or have written for you) a useful and interesting article; make it available for

use on other sites, newsletters, or e-zines either directly or through a resource site; then wait for the organic benefits to accrue. Resource sites that you can submit your articles to are popular with Web publishers of all types because they're perennially hungry for new content-often desperate for it, in fact. Several of the best resources for submitting your articles (or finding some) include:

Connection Team

(www.connectionteam.com). Doesn't post the actual article. They post links to the article as it appears on the author's website so the author receives the traffic. Publishers read and evaluate the articles at the author's site.

[Ezine @rticles](http://www.ezinearticles.com) (www.ezinearticles.com).

Their searchable database of 100,000+ original articles allows newsletter publishers hungry for fresh content to find articles that they can use for inclusion within their next newsletter.

GoArticles (www.goarticles.com). An article search engine and directory, updated daily. One of the largest article databases makes great content available to publishers when they want it, not when someone decides to send it.

IdeaMarketers (www.ideamarketers.com). Writers can post their articles for free to be featured on the site and stored in a searchable database. Publishers, webmasters and e-zine editors then visit and find new content.

Distributing free content like this is one of the most powerful linking and traffic-generation strategies available to you. According to Michael Klasno [2006] reciprocal link exchanges are dead: "This practice does not indicate either site as being an authority and actually gives a slight edge to the lesser ranked site. This strategy has already become obsolete and very soon the search engines will change their algorithms and teach their spiders to take it into account."

But that leaves three-way non-reciprocal linking in which all three sites get a unique inbound link without having to link back in return. Seems complicated (and unlikely!) but how it actually works is very simple-you send your article (linking back to you) to another site, a third site will refer to that article and thus link to them, and finally, you may want to link to that third site to drive traffic to your article and thus back to you. All three get a one-way inbound link:

It should be said that three-way link exchanges, like some other link building strategies, is not as effective as it used to be: "Despite what many people think, three-way link exchanges can be easily identified by search engines and if there are a large number of these types of links are present, it can result in a ranking drop or ban." Nevertheless, this remains a viable strategy if not overdone. The key to leveraging three-way links effectively remains, as always, the quality of the link and of the content.

Delivering relevant links from relevant content is the key. [Klasno 2006] and Walsh [2005] both recommend three-way linking: "The idea is simple: you give other websites content to put on their sites in exchange for a link to your site. The beauty of distributing content for links is that the links generally generate more traffic than links on a resources page. Plus, your article will pre-sell readers on the value of your site."

Branding and generating traffic by distributing valuable content is a powerful strategy that you should be using or leveraging more effectively. But the absolute key is in making sure that your content really is valuable and delivers value to the readers.