

How to Use a Backrefs Comparison for Smarter Link Building

Why Comparing Backlink Data Matters

When I started doing SEO seriously, backlinks were the black box of rankings. You could guess which sites were linking to a competitor, but verifying anything took hours of manual checking. Tools like Ahrefs, Moz, Majestic, and Semrush changed that, but they also created a new problem: whose numbers do you trust? A backrefs comparison helps you reconcile those differences. It is the process of taking the same domain or URL, running it through two or more tools, and understanding why the link counts, domain authority scores, and anchor text patterns differ. Without this step, you risk building a link profile based on incomplete or inflated data.

I have seen campaigns where a client thought they had 500 referring domains based on one tool, only to find that half of those were redirect chains or nofollow links that would never pass value. A proper backrefs comparison caught that before they wasted outreach time. It is not about picking a winner among tools. It is about knowing the blind spots each one has and compensating for them.

The Core Metrics You Should Compare

Every tool defines link authority differently. Ahrefs uses URL Rating (UR) and Domain Rating (DR). Moz uses Domain Authority (DA) and Page Authority (PA). Majestic gives you Trust Flow and Citation Flow. Semrush combines Authority Score with its own backlink database. When you run a [backrefs comparison](#), you want to look at four things side by side: total referring domains, total backlinks, the ratio of dofollow to nofollow links, and the distribution of anchor text. If one tool shows a much higher number of links, check whether it is counting subdomains or duplicate pages. I have seen Moz count multiple subdomain links as separate when Ahrefs groups them under one root domain. Neither is wrong, but you need to know which view matches your link building goals.

For competitor analysis, the comparison becomes even more useful. Say a competitor has a link from a high-authority news site. One tool might show that link as nofollow while another shows it as dofollow. That changes how you evaluate their link profile. I always run a backrefs comparison on my top three competitors before I start any outreach. It gives me a realistic baseline and helps me spot opportunities they might be ignoring.

Practical Steps for Running a Comparison

Start with a single domain you know well, maybe your own site. Export the backlink reports from Ahrefs, Moz, Majestic, and Semrush. Load them into a spreadsheet and look for the same link across multiple tools. You will notice that some tools are faster at discovering new links. Ahrefs tends to update its index more frequently than Majestic, for example. That does not make Majestic useless. Its historic index is deeper for older links, which matters when you are doing a link audit on a site that has been around for years.

Next, check the anchor text columns. A backrefs comparison often reveals that one tool categorizes anchor text as branded while another calls it generic. That happens because each tool uses a different dictionary for what counts as a brand name. If you are doing keyword research for link building, you want to know which anchors actually include your target terms. I have found links that were reported as "branded" by Semrush but actually contained partial match keywords that helped with rankings. A comparison catches that nuance.

What to Do With the Differences

Do not try to average the numbers. They are not measuring the same thing. Instead, use the comparison to qualify links. If all four tools agree that a domain has 50 referring domains and a high authority score, that domain is almost certainly strong. If only one tool shows a high number and the others disagree, treat that data as a lead to investigate rather than a fact. I once had a client whose link profile looked great in Moz but terrible in Ahrefs. The backrefs comparison showed that Moz was counting expired domains that still redirected to the client site, while Ahrefs had already removed them. That discovery saved us from building on a broken foundation.

Another practical use is cleaning up a link profile before a disavow tool submission. Google ignores links that do not exist anymore, but if a tool still shows them, you might waste time disavowing dead links. By comparing two or three tools, you can identify which links are actually live. I run a backrefs comparison quarterly for every site I manage. It takes about an hour and prevents months of bad data decisions.

Common Pitfalls in Link Data

One issue I see often is that people trust the total backlink count without looking at the quality. A site with 10,000 backlinks might have 9,500 of them from blog comments or forum signatures. Those links rarely help SEO and can even hurt if they look spammy. A backrefs comparison helps you filter by link type. Most tools let you export with columns for link type, so you can quickly see how many are editorial, how many are from directories, and how many are from widgets or badges.



Another trap is redirect chains. A link might point to a page that redirects twice before landing on the target. Some tools count that as one link, others count it as three. If you are building links to a specific page, you want to know how many hops a visitor or crawler has to make. A backrefs comparison across tools can highlight those chains because one tool might report the final URL while another reports the intermediate one. I have cleaned up entire link profiles by finding and fixing redirect chains this way.

Nofollow links are another area where tools disagree. Google treats nofollow links differently now, but they still do not pass link equity in the traditional sense. Some tools ignore nofollow links entirely in their authority scores, while others include them. If you are doing competitor analysis, you need to know which links are dofollow to understand their real link building strategy. A backrefs comparison that separates these two types gives you that clarity.

Tools and Their Strengths in a Comparison

Ahrefs is my go-to for fresh data and link intersect analysis. Its link intersect tool lets me find domains that link to two or more competitors but not to me. That is a direct outreach list. Moz is better for understanding spam scores and domain authority in a way that aligns closely with Google's thinking. Majestic has the largest historic index, which is useful for link audits on older domains. Semrush combines backlink data with keyword research, so I use it when I want to see which backlinks are driving traffic for specific terms. Each tool has a blind spot, and a backrefs comparison across them fills those gaps.

For example, I once ran a backrefs comparison on a client in the home services space. Ahrefs showed 120 referring domains, Moz showed 95, and Majestic showed 140. The difference came from how each tool handled subdomains and expired pages. By cross-referencing, I found that 30 of Majestic's links were from a single expired subdomain that had been hijacked. That domain was hurting the client's link profile. Without the comparison, I would have missed it entirely.

How Often to Compare

I recommend a backrefs comparison every quarter for established sites and monthly for new sites. New sites build links faster, and tools may index them at different speeds. A monthly check keeps you from celebrating a link that another tool has already deleted. For established sites, quarterly is enough to catch major shifts in competitor link profiles or changes in how Google treats certain link types. I also do a comparison whenever I start a new link building campaign. It gives me a baseline that accounts for all the tools, not just one.

Final Thoughts on Making It Repeatable

The value of a backrefs comparison is not in the numbers themselves. It is in the judgment you develop by seeing the same data from different angles. Over time, you learn which tools to trust for which situations. You stop chasing vanity metrics like total backlinks and start focusing on link quality, anchor text diversity, and the ratio of dofollow to nofollow links. That shift changes how you do link building entirely. You spend less time on low-value directories and more time on editorial placements that actually move rankings.

If you are new to this, start small. Pick one competitor, run the comparison with two tools, and write down what you learn. Do that for a month, and you will already have more insight than most people get from a year of relying on a single dashboard. The tools are just lenses. Your job is to look through all of them and see the full picture.