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U.K. jeweler beats back online counterfeiters

Links of London takes action against 230 sites poaching traffic and sales.

Tamara Thiessen

Jewelry retailer Links of London has taken action against 230 web sites that were using its name to attract online shoppers or selling counterfeit versions of Links items. The campaign has increased traffic to Links of London's e-commerce site and reduced its online advertising costs.

Caroline Rolfe the company's head of online, says sites selling counterfeit goods and cyber-squatters that created web addresses that mimicked those of Links of London were re-directing 1.7 million annual visits from Links of London domains. Most of the perpetrators were based in Asia, she says. "The combined traffic of those sites was far more than that to our main site." Links operates eight global e-commerce sites.

Many of the copycat or counterfeit sites would bid to place search ads when consumers searched for Links of London. That increased the price Links paid for paid search ads and redirected traffic to these other sites, Rolfe says.

The problem she says escalated after Links of London began aggressively promoting its brand online, working with digital marketing agency I Spy.

"We were a victim of our own success; particularly with our brand superstars, the sweeties and friendship bracelets, which were being replicated more than any other products," Rolfe says.

Links of London engaged MarkMonitor Inc., a company that specializes in protecting brands online, and it ferreted out 230 e-commerce sites that were poaching a million visits a year from Links of London, according to a MarkMonitor spokeswoman.

As part of the campaign, MarkMonitor identified 200 million pounds (US\$313 million) worth of phony merchandise being offered on copycat sites; Links, by threatening legal action, was able to have that merchandise removed from those sites, diminishing their appeal, Rolfe says. "By forcing the counterfeiters to remove our images, their web sites look far less effective and genuine."

She notes that fake merchandise is widely available online and harder to detect than in the physical world. "In an offline environment, it is much easier to presume they are fakes, whereas some online counterfeiters are very clever at making themselves look like authorized sites," she says.

She says the combined work of MarkMonitor and I Spy has helped slash the competition from counterfeiters, leading to a 41% cut in cost-per-click prices on branded search terms and a 50% hike in traffic to its web site. "The two agencies have been able to unite in their fight against the counterfeiters using the search space, so there is less traffic going to the counterfeit sites and it costs us less money to drive traffic to our sites," she says.

In addition, Links of London was awarded in October ownership of 65 counterfeit Links of London URLs, operated by one unscrupulous individual. That award came as a result of a complaint filed under the Uniform Domain Name Dispute Resolution Policy of web address overseer ICANN, a program aimed at protecting legitimate brands on the web.

"Ten of them were in the top 16 of our counterfeit web sites," Rolfe says. "Now they all redirect to our web site and cannot be repurchased by counterfeiters, so we have eliminated a large chunk of illegal activity."

She says the jeweler has helped set an important legal precedent. "It shows counterfeiters that we are really taking this seriously, whereas many luxury brands are not willing to go so far to protect their brands."