

A close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair and a slight smile, wearing a blue button-down shirt. The background is blurred, suggesting an outdoor setting.

JAMES SCHRAMKO

Doubling Google Traffic in 6 Months by Recovering Your Old Google Rankings

SEO challenges? SEOLeverage's Gert Mellak shares how one brand turned dwindling Google rankings into massive success, in the space of half a year.



Gert Mellak

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to my show. This is episode 1038, and we're talking Google SEO. Welcome back, [Gert Mellak](#), from [SEOLeverage.com](#). Good to have you again.

Gert: James, always a pleasure to be here.

James: [You're always on this show](#). You're a hyper regular guest lately, and for good reason. Everyone else is talking about AI and whatever else. And meanwhile, Google is actually working pretty well for some people. You've been able to double someone's traffic in six months just by recovering their old Google rankings.

So I'm really curious to know more about this case study, because I love actual things that have happened because they can be instructive. And I have a suspicion that someone like me, who has actually been around for a while, got a couple of websites, might be able to learn something from this.

Gert: Yeah, definitely a pleasure to share this here, it's definitely also a scenario that we see quite often. So we are always really happy when we come across a product like this, because we know exactly what to do next, and how to guide clients to a much better performance.

In this case, it was really six months, doubling traffic was a really good result. Really also, have to thank that particular client here and their team, because they were extremely fast executing whatever we lined up, they just smashed it out. And actually asked for more to even move faster. Execution is a big part of it. But definitely, you want to know where actually the levers are.

So can content really be evergreen?

James: So what happened in this case? It implies that they had old Google rankings, but for some reason, their rankings diminished?

Gert: Absolutely, because one, I think, misconception people have is that content can be evergreen. And there's a little bit of a nuance to it. So it is true that some content doesn't really change in some industries. So it's still valid, whatever you're told 10 years ago might still be valid today. But the way people want to consume this information has changed.

And this is the part that people actually are missing, where they say, Hey, I couldn't explain it in any other way. So they just leave the content there, because they don't have a better idea on how to phrase this. But they forget things like the content layout, for example, the content design, the length, the details people expect, etc. And especially where they expect those details, apart from a few technical things that definitely have been changing.

When you forget what's working...

James: So in this case, would it be fair to say that maybe they found a new love, they were getting results somewhere else and put their attention there and let it fade? Because I think we're all guilty of that at some point.

Gert: Absolutely. Everybody's guilty. And whenever, obviously, the idea's also, if somebody, something works really well, you want to do more of it, you want to double down on it. And this absolutely makes sense. But after a few years, you come, in this case, it was YouTube, for example, this client got really, really famous on YouTube in his space.

At some point, you go back and say, If I search for what I'm actually selling, I'm nowhere. Right? I was even better off when we still had the Yellow Pages with my other business. But in this case, I'm nowhere. So what happens if something happens to YouTube, right? If there are any blocks, any copyright claims, even if they're not true, you still are single-source reliant.

And also that you have all this content build up over the years, and it is on the website, it should actually be doing something for you. And this was really the entry point. So they absolutely neglected, knowingly, SEO, because they were focusing elsewhere. Now it's time to regroup. And so okay, let's make sure SEO is one important part, and we leveraged hundreds of articles that have been built up over time.

James: Well I've been hearing anecdotal evidence that YouTube's a fantastic search engine, it's ranking well in the Google search results for the videos that people search on the platform, find things, how-to content, technical stuff goes particularly well. I can see how you'd be, like, so excited about it, and it's going well, that you don't pay attention to what you had.

I mean, I love that saying, double down on what's working. But I would suspect some people actually don't even know what was working in the first place. They're not really measuring or tracking. And secondly, there's this phenomenon where, from time to time, I think we do things that work well, but we just get sort of numb to it or complacent, or we don't place as much value on it as our competitor would love to have something going just so well as what we have. But we don't even place a high value on it because it's become the norm.

And I know to a large extent, I've been enjoying search engine traffic for a long time. But I still respect it. And we do measure it, and it's something that is important to us. So we use a stop-start-continue methodology in our own team meetings. And the continue is the part where we say, Hey, what's actually working really well that we should continue to do and not just let fade away? And SEO has always been one of those pillars.

So in the case we're talking about today, they got seduced by the great YouTube following, the success shot up, the focus went all in. And of course, that became the thing that's going well, let's double down, but it came at the expense of the SEO.

Is SEO worth thinking about?

Is it even worth worrying about the SEO?

Gert: It is, absolutely. And it's going to be even more important with AI now trying to make sense of whatever you put out there and describe your brand. So you can imagine that everything that's out there about your brand, or about a similar brand, might be used against you, so to speak. So you really want to control the messaging as much as possible.

You can really imagine that the entire website is speaking to an engine, and this engine is going to reproduce whatever is on this website. This requires a few different things. This requires, first of all, that you are extremely consistent with your messaging, consistent in how you name and describe your brand.

But it also requires a more technical level of preparing the content. There are things like structured data, schema codes, people might have heard, really, in simple ways, explaining what different things are and giving always enough context. We expect, like the Google just gets things, just because they have words on a page.

But Google needs a lot of specific words on a page in order to understand what the entire article is about. It's not enough that they talk about email marketing, and that's it, and now this article is about email marketing. If they don't talk about subject lines, and they don't talk about opening rates, Google might have a completely different perception about this article. So for us, producing content for search engines has become much, much more technical these days.

Are there other things you can do?

James: Nice. So okay, let's say we've realized that the Google SEO campaign has faded a bit. We've got other options available to us. So why don't we just top up with paid ads? Or if YouTube's working well, we go over the short form content on other social platforms? Like, how do we take our resource and decide which bucket to put it in, and or if we should have multiple things in play, or we should be more focused on just fewer things, but doing them better?

Gert: I'm a very big fan of Google ads, specifically, we've always been doing search marketing and getting really, really good results with search marketing. And Google ads actually pairs very, very well with SEO, because we can feed the information from one channel directly into the other one. And for example, just yesterday, I was talking to someone who wants to join our program.

And I said, like, Could you run some Google Ads first, to really test your offer, make sure this actually works, make sure we know which kind of keywords seem to be resonating better with your audience before we actually line up an entire content strategy and work for four months or six months in order to get those pieces of content up?

And Google ads, for example, also is a good complementary solution for remarketing campaigns. Get this SEO traffic that you generate as free, give them another chance to actually opt in for something because they then see a banner, see a YouTube video, etc. I believe you should be these days on as many channels as you can possibly handle.



My personal belief, the Omni channel approach also is going to support AI engines in the future where the more you're out there, the more your brand is out there, the more important your brand is going to be perceived. However, at some point, you need to make decisions. And a strong strategic decision for me is always to have organic rankings.

It's like the most important thing that somebody is searching for what you're selling needs to find you. It's like the most immediate action you can trigger is at the very bottom of the funnel, somebody searches for SEO services, I want them to find me in certain contexts, right? It's like the very basic thing, I think.

Google ads is great. We have a lot of people that come in here and telling me they're spending \$20,000 on Google ads every month, and if there was a better way, or a different way, or maybe they can lower the budget a little bit. And with SEO, what we actually achieve is to lower the average cost per acquisition, because we just even out the playing field, we have a lower average cost per lead or whatever it is.

And this is just a strategic decision, which how many channels do you want to really feed, and where can you align your resources. But it comes back to the point that you actually mentioned initially, where the data is really important. Many people don't know it was actually working well. Many people think it is still working well, but they don't even drill down on what kind of keywords is driving their traffic.

James: They need a Gert in their life.

The realization something was amiss

So what did you do in this case? Were they already on board? Or did they just sort of have this discovery and then come to you? What was the process of them, like the big reveal, Hey, you know, you were getting results, but you're not getting results anymore?

Gert: The big reveal was they definitely had enough data, thankfully, to notice that something was off, they were not getting the same amount of leads anymore. They also had a slower growth in their YouTube channel, because their organic traffic got more brand exposure also driven to YouTube.

So in this case, they definitely had some numbers, where they said, Okay, apparently something is off with search marketing. They couldn't really pinpoint it, they thought the content was evergreen, it should really still rank. And nothing has changed in this space for this content in a few years. And then the first thing for us is always to establish a scorecard, establish a status and say, Where are we with this project? Where could we be? And especially breaking it down.

You don't understand data until you break it down. And we need to know, what is the content situation like, what is the user experience on this website? In this case, even they were planning a redesign where we were then involved as well. And the site is going to go live in a few weeks, I think.

So it's really important to have an overall idea of what is happening and what is actually working in your space. Working meaning, what is Google favoring? What is it that they know users want to see? And with this audit, then you have a good idea on how to move forward.

James: So you decided that the design was out of date, and out of keeping with what Google likes to rank, you've suggested a new design. What other things came out of the process that you would have to improve to double your traffic?

A need to reduce

Gert: Definitely, in this case, one really important one, we see this all the time when people have been having a site for many years, is content pruning, and content organization, as we call it. And it's really in practice is giving our clients a list of all their pages. And we try to categorize them a little bit, at least, to make it easy, because if you have 1500 pages in front of you, it's really hard to organize this.

So we do the work to actually organize this for them, and give them like, bite-sized chunks to go through. But then the client would have like a list of 20, 30 pages to analyze, because they with their industry knowledge can then tell me, Look, these are similar, these are something completely different.

This is really hard to do for an agency, we're not industry experts in every industry, we have been learning quite a bit over time. But there are some industries that are still really, really hard for us. But we prepare the content and also give clients a certain amount of data to make decisions. So imagine they give you five articles and say, James, I believe these five articles deal with exactly the same thing. This is what Google thinks, Google is clearly favoring one of them. Can you make an executive decision and tell me, Can we merge these five into one?

So Google has it easier, can process your website easier. And it's also cheaper for Google to process your website. And this isn't expected. Many people forget Google is spending money to process a website, they don't talk about it, because they want to kind of pretend they have unlimited resources, etc. But they are more and more going to favor those websites that make it easy for them to extract information.

James: Yeah, I mean, I feel sorry for them, you know, the world's biggest scraper has to pay money for that. [laughs] Oh, the poor things.

But you know, that was actually pretty shocking to me when you came to me and said, Well, you've got too much content. And I'm like, Sorry, what? Because it used to be like, Hey, you know, there's sites like Wikipedia, they've got a lot more content than me. And they seem to rank pretty well for plenty of stuff.

However, it turns out, yeah, if you're getting a bit of overlap or whatever, you can economize and make it easier for Google to figure out what your site's about and then to present it. So we had to consolidate. And we're often doing that. We lump a few things together. Luckily, the decision-making process in our company is quite short, because there's not many of us. And we do have pretty good context.

I remember those difficult ones when we had an SEO business like veterinarians, surgeons, particular technical lawyers, etc. Like it was really hard to come up with context or content to understand what it was even about. And there was definitely requirements around what you can and cannot say.

And, of course, one of the hilarious stories I heard about AI lately was someone automatically generated a book on edible mushrooms and the information was so incorrect that like, it would literally kill somebody if they followed the instructions in this eBook that was automatically generated. So I shouldn't laugh about it, but it's a great example of how wrong it could go if you don't have enough context. So I think there's still going to be a role for humans somewhere in this process.

The stuff that can go wrong

But so, you in collaboration with the client, identify, what's Google trying to do? Where are you at now on the scorecard with what you've got, and where do you need to be, and what has to happen, and then the shortest possible path.

So in this case, it was pruning. It was organizing. It was closing content gaps and ambiguity, revising a new design. You had to obviously discuss things with designers for that. I imagine the relaunch, gosh, that was tricky. You know, the occasional launch a new site with no index, no follow by accident because it was still in a sandbox or whatever. Usability issues, old links not being redirected and stuff. How much of a nightmare can that be for people?

Gert: It can be an incredible nightmare. We have seen all kinds of things. I remember a project that was having from Austria back then, there was a site relaunch and they forgot to take out there's no index, and they were waiting for the big success and three days in, they just got less and less traffic because Google started removing their pages, all of the index, and nobody had this.

Thankfully, we have built up - not our client, this was a competitor to be honest. But thankfully, from those mistakes, we have been really building up frameworks right now, we have complete migration frameworks, relaunch frameworks, we coordinate this. So clients give us a heads up and say, Look, we just launched a website. Can you build this, take these, crawl these, etc.?

A relaunch is always tricky, because for Google, it's like shuffling the cards again, they really don't know how the users are going to react to your new design, even though the content might be the same. But there might be certain elements, titles, descriptions, headers, etc. that are really important elements for Google that are different just based on the different platform, different design, etc.

So you want to make sure that you have somebody accompanying this process, who has some established frameworks, and can really just rely on those systems in place and knows that if those systems are all checked, it's a safe migration.

What else needs doing

James: What happens with all the other stuff? We just changed our sales page design. And as part of that, and I was just floating around the Maldives with our friend, [Greg Merrilees](#), you know, fantastic designer, [Studio1design.com](#), superfan of this show, so I'm sure he's listening. Big shout out to Greg, who's an absolute charger, by the way, you should see this guy on the waves, you would never pick it.

Anyway, he was very helpful with like, Hey, let's do a new website design. But then, of course, he said, Well, we're going to have to update the podcast banners, the social media page banners, the podcast page. Like, basically, all the other related materials have to be upgraded with the same imagery across the board for consistent look and feel.

So I imagine if they're going well on YouTube, then the YouTube header is going to have to be updated. If they've got Facebook happening, then that has to be up there, and the landing pages, maybe they have to check if they're still compliant, have they got the right words on it or that it loads quickly enough, or whatever. Are there other considerations at this point?

Gert: I would definitely focus on, first of all, bringing Greg in. Studio 1 has been helping a lot of our clients here. But now definitely, definitely focus on what is actually driving your results. I'm going to talk about two examples, two e-commerce sites. One completely relying on Google image search, they made more than half of the sales through Google image search. The other one gets two percent traffic from Google Images.

What does this mean? It means that changing the images, or in one case, they came to us because they changed platforms, and all the image URLs weren't the same anymore, and they lost like, more than half of their revenue. It's a big issue. And if you now start replacing images, and all the images have different names, and you don't put redirects in place, etc. to tell Google what is actually happening, Google has no other chance than to drop your rankings and take you out of Google Images until they get confidence six months later, or eight months later. Again, into images, there's only so much you can do.

Whereas on the other side, the migration is completely going to be image-agnostic so to speak, we just make sure that they are in good shape and on the new site, and we can focus on everything else. You really want to know what is driving your results. And people, this is not something you will see in Google Analytics easily, how many clicks do I get from images, like Google image search, it will be in Google Search Console.

So you definitely want to make sure that you drill down where your data actually comes from. And then you can assess a potential impact. For Google it's really important to keep as many things in place, this is going to make a smoother transition. If a lot of things change, if the content on top of the page changes for example, or image names, etc., you want to make sure you put some strategies in place.

An ongoing process

James: So what happened then? Do you all gather around, pop champagne, and flick the switch, and then the new site goes live, and then what?

Gert: The process never ends, right? So SEO, the fun part with SEO is it never gets boring. And Google just keeps pushing out updates that keep us happy and busy and testing new stuff. So when a new site goes live after a relaunch, definitely, there is going to be a period where you most likely see a little bit of a dip that you can compensate temporarily with Google ads or other activities, PR, etc. in order to compensate a little bit if you fear a revenue loss until it picks up again, but then you really need to keep it up. Right?

So the big thing, really, if you say, we can continue in a process, means for us here in SEOLeverage that we continually make it better. I just had a team call and was talking to the team and said, Look, our baseline is really good, we get so much great feedback, but it's only going to stay flat if we can continue to push it.



And this is what you also should be doing with content, you need to continuously find out, what is it that Google wants? And Google really appreciates if they drop your ranking and you revise this piece of content based on what they're ranking now, it is going to come back up. Google really appreciates that you work on your existing content on existing pages, continue to make them better, working to link building, working to tying all the content together so it actually makes sense. And this is going to then make for a good long-term strategy.

How it's all panning out

James: And so, what happened in this case, you know, the headline, is it doubled? Did that happen? And how long did that take?

Gert: It took six months to double. It's still going strong. So we expect it's probably going to triple. We're really good now, set up in the space, the new design is amazing, much more user-friendly. So we can expect a slight boost probably after a couple of months or so there. And now, we have a big advantage they didn't have before, which is that we are now directing the entire approach.

So we are going to continue the clean, we're just using really the design period for cleaning up and getting this additional traffic in. But now we have, like, a really strong foundation where we can really move forward, close additional content gaps, really build up libraries in the industry that are really going to be interesting, and actually scale this up and bring more and more people in.

James: So we also go out and find out where people have linked to the website and ask them to update their links or to put links and other places on the internet where they could be linking to this new updated, current web design, is that something that happens still?



Gert: Link building is still a thing, and it's not going anywhere. Might be different shapes or form. And what Google prefers is not what actually works. Link building is definitely here to stay. But it needs to be more and more relevant. So Google is really, really smart these days at figuring out if a link is placed on a site where it doesn't make sense.

So all those like, online magazines, etc. where there's no relevance at least with the article or the category, etc., it's just too obvious. Google is just going to assign zero value, they don't even bother with penalizing it. You want to be really strategic about which kind of site naturally would link to mine, and then pursue this particular link.

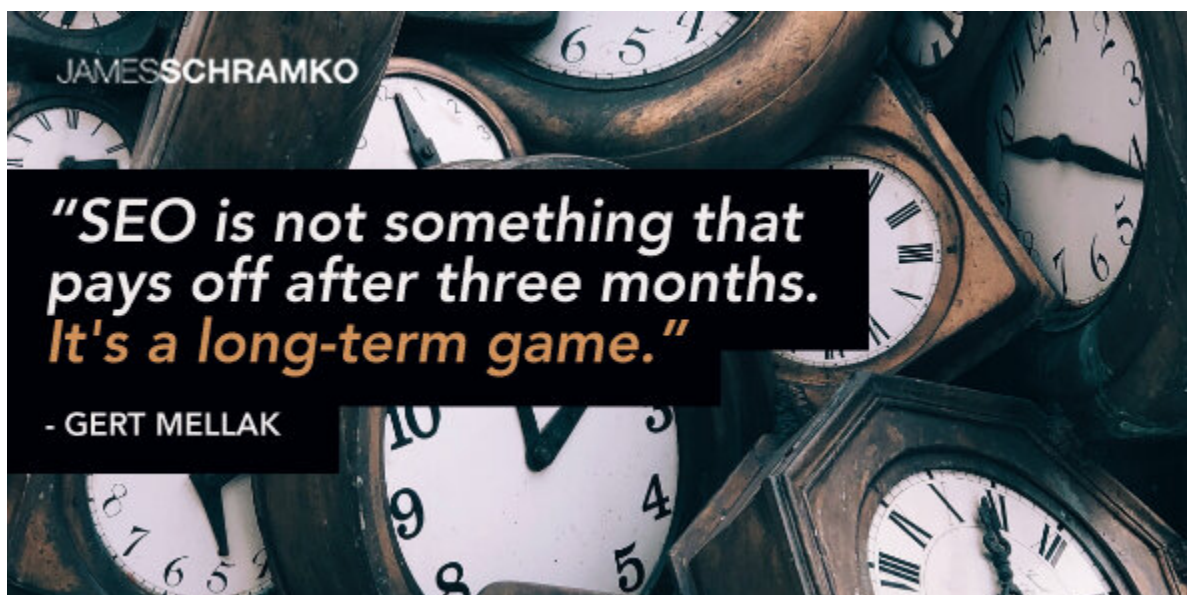
We would probably not go out necessarily to change existing links. But really make sure that all the old URLs that don't exist anymore redirect to the new ones. And at the same time build consistently links to the new URLs to build up this authority.

Who stands to win most?

James: So who's got the most to gain from this type of strategy? I guess it's someone who knows they used to rank quite well and have maybe as a result of listening to this, perhaps they've gone and had a look and thought, Oh gee, our SEO slipped a bit? Or if they don't know how to tell, I guess they could reach out and ask for a scorecard.

Gert: Absolutely. So definitely, they can head over to seoleverage.com/scorecard and just use their own judgment, first of all, and say, Okay, do I think a score in conversion tracking in content creation in link building, internal links, etc., get a little bit of a feeling, and then reach out to us and potentially look into getting a full audit to really confirm those assumptions, or really, raise maybe some other issues that weren't even on the radar, for an audit. And a site that has at least 100 articles or something like this, and has been around for at least two years, is probably a really good candidate, because chances are there's a lot of unlocked potential.

James: Will someone get a return on investment on that? I mean, in this case, did the client make more money back than what it cost them to renovate their site?



Gert: Definitely, definitely. SEO is not something that pays off after three months. It's a long-term game. But ultimately, it's all free traffic, free brand exposure, free leads that you're building up that might be referring other clients as well. So this SEO definitely, in across the marketing channel, usually has the most important ROI or the highest ROI, just because the traffic is free. And if the traffic is actually relevant, and this was the most important part here in this project, you'll also see it in leads and sales.

James: I see a lot of parallels in SEO and weight loss. It's like, you can do it quickly if you take your Ozempic or something, you know, or get a gastric band. Like, there are fast ways to do it, but they're not generally safe or effective long term. But if you're prepared to start and take your time with it, you can have significant results.

But also like weight loss, once you get there, there's so many other benefits. This is going to improve any of their paid campaigns, it's going to inform their marketing for their YouTube channel and everything else. So it's going to boost everything else they do, and magnify the end result.

Brand awareness and conversion

Gert: Absolutely. Even for brand awareness. We have clients who get mostly branded conversions. So people were typing the brand name, and then get a conversion. But we see a direct relation between because they don't have other channels between, getting more traffic, and then more branded searches and more conversions.

And so, it's always interesting to find what your conversion path is. This might be getting people to your website and to YouTube subscribe. And after two months following you on YouTube, they might then turn into a lead or a customer. Or it might be specifically just getting them to know your tool, your brand works really well in SaaS. This way, they get to know your tool as one of the potential alternatives through whatever piece of content in your space, and then they search for you directly. So brand awareness is a really big one that's very often underestimated in SEO.

James: Yeah, and that can be a fun one. I just saw in the news today, actually, the first legal case against Elon Musk's X, and it's by X Social Media, if you can believe it. You know, they've like, literally just steamrolled somebody's complete brand. And I imagine their branded search would be up right now. And people having a little look like I was, so who is this company? And how much of an inconvenience is this going to be for them?

I was actually in a much smaller version of that when I had my last brand, a very large company started trading with the same brand name, and it started diluting and making confusion in the marketplace. So you know, trademark issues aside or whatever, I think the personal branding is really strong. I mean, clearly, I rank pretty well for my own name. And it's something I have control of.

And it's the very reason I learned SEO way back in the beginning, to control my brand. Listeners of our previous episodes would have heard that [story where I was trying to drown out IMDb](#). But I think SEO is underrated. I think it's still solid here in 2023.

How AI could impact branding

You did allude to - it's more important to control your brand [with the advent of AI](#). I think we should just close on that.

What are you seeing right now in terms of how it's starting to make its way in? Because I'm seeing some search engines - no, some chat engines are offering you to go and then search to verify the things. I think I saw this in Bard where you do a search and then you can click on a link to go and search Google to confirm what you found. It seems like traffic is coming to the search engine from the chat tools in that situation.

Gert: I think it's an intermediary situation right now. So we have like, ChatGPT who pretty much changed the game for everybody. Now, tons and tons of tools, sitting on top of ChatGPT or other alternatives in the meantime, offering a similar or maybe more focused use case to use those tools.

Ultimately, what everybody needs to understand is that ChatGPT or those language models at this stage, to a large extent make stuff up based on probability. They're going to predict what is the next word, and then they have two words, and they're going to predict the third one. And after three words, they're going to predict the fourth one.

It's fascinating that it works so well. But it also explains why sometimes it's completely off. And what we see this way very, very clear, and everybody probably who has been playing with ChatGPT, to continue with this example, has seen that if you give it more context, the answer is better.

James: Yeah. It'll even lie about word count in a paragraph.

Gert: Exactly, absolutely. But the more context you feed in, and so if you base on this list of facts, now create this article, the article is going to be much better, right? And the same happens with engines now that start to answer search queries, because they completely depend on the input. Input in, output comes out, the result comes out.

James: Garbage in, garbage out.

Gert: There you go. If the input is bad, the output is going to be bad. I found an example, I think you shared it in one of these episodes, about Nike wasn't a major running shoe brand, just because there was a training material which was a customer review training the machine on how to assess Nike as a brand, it's ridiculous.

And this is this intermediate period, I do believe it's going to get better. Might take another year, two years, five years, I don't know. And I would expect that right now, where Google says fact check this on your own with the search results, they do this largely because they obviously want to trigger more ads clicks as well. So it's to their benefit to have people actually search.

This is also something where people think like, Google just wants to give the answer. No, they want to trigger more search clicks. So if they ask you to fact check, you're going to trigger a new search, see more ads, click on more ads, and it's going to be more profit for Google again. But I would expect that Google at some point gets to a stage where they can fact check automatically, or largely automatically or give you a probability and say, We believe this is 85% correct. And then it's going to be a little bit more user-friendly.

But what is really important, and this is now is the second-best time, best was last year, to start doing this, is be very consistent with your brand messaging, and really have a good idea what is being said about your brand out there. We have clients right now already starting to hire us for brand monitoring. And every week, my team goes in, assesses all the brand mentions that we find on the internet about them. Are they neutral? Are they positive? Are they negative?

We might be doing another episode about this, because it's really fascinating, because all this material then goes in. We had a client having issues with an ex-employee suddenly talking badly about his experience working at this company. This is then part of the result when you ask ChatGPT or whatever, what this company is about.

James: It comes part of the training data.

Gert: Exactly, it becomes part of the training data and for the engine it's equally important than a blog post that describes the entire company history.

James: Right. Well, that's very interesting. I think on that cliffhanger, we might have to have you back talking about the evolution of AI and reputation management, clearly, an important topic.

In wrap-up...

So in summary, you can double your traffic. Don't ignore SEO. If you did get results before, then you have hope that you can get it back. You just have to have a strategic plan.

Starts with the scorecard, which is a form of gap analysis. But importantly, it shows you exactly where to focus on the fix. And then you have a realistic timeline and recover that result. And that's just adding to your traffic source. And of course, I imagine it's still true that Google search traffic has pretty good intent and can be quite a high-value source of traffic.

Gert: Absolutely, because people have this feeling that they did their own research, they were not tricked into anything by an ad. Everybody's used to having every third post on Instagram be an ad and feel tricked by all kinds of different outlets. Google research has this feeling of you found your own, came to your own opinion. And this automatically translates to higher conversion rates and higher purchase intent.

James: Love it. Amazing. I've been chatting with Gert Mellak from SEOLeverage.com. Always a treasure trove of high-level information regarding search engine optimization. Thank you so much, Gert. I hope you have a lovely evening.

Gert: Thank you so much.

JAMES SCHRAMKO

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