JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

Getting Better SEO Results with Less Stuff

James and SEOLeverage's Gert Mellak break down the pros of content pruning in SEO. Hear how reducing content can boost your site's Google presence.

Gert Mellak

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to my podcast. This is episode 1051. Today, we're talking about getting better SEO results, but with way less stuff. And this is an interesting one for me, because as my site has grown over the years, I've ended up with too much content. And I never thought that was possible until I met this chap, Gert Mellak, from SEOLeverage.com. Hello, Gert.

Can you have too much content?

Gert: Hey, James, ready to clean up your site now.

James: Yeah, I mean, the game used to be, you know, try and be Wikipedia, have as much content as possible. And people would say, Should you have lots of little niche sites or one authority site? And I'd say, Authority site, good, deep content on it.

We've ended up with, well, over 1000 podcasts, and it turns out when we do the site crawl - and you send through reports, etc. because you've been helping us with our SEO - there's some pages that are not getting crawled or not getting visited often that you say are using up Google's resources, and they're just not bothering about it, and that we could, in fact, be better off by consolidating, pruning, and redirecting traffic into some of the areas of the site that are helpful for us.

And I've got my notes here from the other day. But I think there was a filter. And that was, we should keep the stuff that show me as being a trusted authority in my field, that are related to anything that we actually sell or that my partners sell.

And then all the rest of the stuff could go, more or less, unless there's a lot of backlinks to it, in which we should do a 301-search engine friendly redirect, or unless we're getting a lot of traffic to it, and somehow, it's converting, which would be a miracle because it'd be off topic, doesn't see us as a trusted authority, and it's nothing to do with what we sell. Is that roughly what you said to me the other day?

The evolution of SEO strategies

Gert: It's pretty much a really good summary. We definitely need to unpack this a little bit because it's not only about the resources Google obviously uses. Google definitely uses processing time for everything. They just process, read, scan, index from your website, but it's also about how they understand your brand.

James: And has that changed? I mean, I know they update the index often, daily, maybe? I know they don't publish their algorithm. But has there been changes? You know, at some point in the past, was it okay to have a lot of stuff, and you could get good results from it? Because I have noticed some of the website traffic seems to have come down a little bit. And I feel like something changed.

Gert: Definitely, I think we just have a lot of moving elements here. So first of all, we have just more competition, which means every single piece of content you can think of, probably has already been written about somewhere by someone, right, by now. We're not in the, like 10 years ago, 15 years ago, it was "easy to get traffic" because you're probably the only one on a piece of content about a certain topic.

These days, there's just a lot out there, and a lot of fresh content as well, the frequency has increased as well in which we publish content. And especially with social media, which I think is one of the main culprits where we now do so much content pruning, we just got forced almost to create a blog post every couple of days to have something to share. Nobody wanted to share information from their competitors, everybody created their own.

So many, many sites that come to us, to a consulting session, say, Hey, we have been building 1,000, 1500, 3,000 pieces of content over the years, and now we are dropping, we need to run ads because our organic traffic doesn't work anymore.

Content relevance and authority

And then we look at this content. And very often what happens is completely unrelated. They just happen to go more and more away from the core business. So Google sees a lot of content that has nothing to do with what they actually want to sell.

James: And I imagine people's businesses change over time. Mine certainly has. Aside from changing the brand, over the years, I've sort of focused a little more on certain aspects. Probably, you wind back the clock, I was a little more tactical. I had courses on traffic, I had courses on Pay Per Click, I had training. I had an SEO business, I had a website development business. I taught affiliate marketing.

These days, I'm far more likely to be talking about the membership site model, the revenue share model, or just being a sounding board for more general strategic discussions, because that's the sort of level that my clients have grown up into. And I do have partners. I've got SEO partners, so you, for example. I've got the website platform partner, I've got the video marketing agency partner, I've got traffic educator, I've got an operations expert. And I have a share in a recruitment business.

So these are topics we might find on my website. But everything else, I guess over the years, we've collected a lot of episodes. And when I look back through my past episode list, some of those people I could look at them from a few years back, I mean, we've been podcasting since about 2009, I don't even remember some of the guests. I don't know if that's bad or not.

Gert: That's normal, I guess.

James: Or whatever.

Someone was on an episode the other day, they said, It's been a long time since my last episode, and I'm thinking, I don't remember the first episode, I had to look it up. And it was ages ago. You know, it's like a decade ago. And like, if I don't remember it, and it's my podcast, should Google care that much about promoting that podcast, or someone searching for a phrase, you know, 10 years later?

Gert: Probably not. And also, probably the way you presented the podcast episode back then has nothing to do with what people expect today, which is ultimately what Google wants to rank. So when we do the content pruning, we want to be very careful, obviously, not drop off anything that is still related to the core business. But very often, we ask our clients to make a decision and say, Hey, this is actually still relevant, we just need to do some work on it.

The stuff that goes and the stuff that stays

So we might still keep it for a while, but line it up on the roadmap to get back to it, rewrite it, rerecord it sometimes, maybe divide it up into two different sections, because now, Google would want to have a more specific answer, maybe not that generalistic. So definitely, there is value in those past episodes as long as it's related. But you definitely, very often, need to do some work on it.

James: And if it's not related, you just delete it, or you noindex, nofollow it?

Gert: It depends on what you want to be doing with this episode. If you still expect people to listen to it, for example, it's not related, but you still get downloads on your podcast statistics, where you say, hey, people still listen to this, and they might refer back to this, you might just noindex it, tell Google, look, this is not for you, but if somebody searches on your website for this particular episode, you want them to find a page and the mentioned resources, etc., you can't drop it off completely.

Otherwise, what we very often recommend is to redirect it to something very, very similar in topic, chances are with 1000 podcasts, you talked about, I don't know, email marketing in several episodes, there might be one article that you can create on email marketing, and you just link all those episodes together there. And then you have one piece, and make sure that this single piece is actually related to your core business. And this is why it's still around and why it's still referring to the podcast episodes.

And then you've got episodes that have nothing to do any more, business has evolved, like you say, we do something else now, we have this as well. I was doing fitness marketing lead generation, if you remember, you were already helping me back then.

James: For Spain.

Gert: We don't do anything in lead generation in Spain anymore. So definitely moved on as well. And this content just doesn't make sense to keep it around. If there are links pointing to this content from other websites, and they are somehow related to your core business, you might want to redirect this somewhere else to a website just to preserve this potential. But sometimes, it's just easier to just cut the cord and drop it off.

James: I think you're right. I think this is really across our entire business. Today, I sold a whole bunch of shares. I found some scrappy shares that I don't think will ever go up so I deleted them. I've been clearing out some of my remaining domain names, I have so many, the renewals keep coming through, and I'm like, I've got to turn these ones off, or I've got to sell these, and I've listed several on the marketplace.

We've got down to about one or two websites now. The least possible. I even turned off a personal website, it was getting so much spam. I had an email address, james@james.me, but it turns out people just fill that in when they go to forms for anything. I had the weirdest emails from all around the world, like a caravan site, they're like, enter your name, james@james.me. I don't know why they chose that. But anyway, I've turned it off.

Content pruning and redirection

I think that people get so focused on creating, and adding, and adding, and adding that we do need to prune. We need to clean up. Where does this occur in terms of the process when you're working with a client? Is it in the early phase or is it something that comes down the track?

Gert: It's probably both, but usually when we start with a client, we audit their website, establish a scorecard, establish the different scores for the different elements that we believe are important for SEO. And one is definitely content, and how much the content is related to the brand. We have a specific position in our scorecard for this, just because it happens so often that a lot of the content is not related.

We had a client, for example, where we spent the first two months pruning. They had thousands of articles. And actually 80% or 85% of their traffic was completely unrelated to the business. We just saw this in the keywords, in Google Search Console, you could see what kind of keywords do people type in to find a website, it had nothing to do what they actually wanted to sell.

So they were at the stage where they even had to invest heavily in Google ads in order to compensate and still get leads. And then once we pruned this, Google just figured it out again. For me, it's always like this join-the-dots game my kids play, when you just put so many additional dots on this drawing or in this scheme, it's just much, much harder to connect the dots and see the real image.

So once you start taking those dots away that are completely unrelated, it's very simple to figure it out. And this is what we just have seen time and again, on different websites, where I just say, you take away what's just too much, like dead weight, build up over time, for whatever reason, it doesn't matter. Now we're in a different situation, make sure it's completely clear for Google and for any user coming in, what you're doing and what you want to be known for now.

Aligning content with business intent

James: Do you remember, back in the old days, the teachers had a teacher's marking template, they would put over a multiple-choice page that only showed the answers so they could just count them up. That's what it feels like for Google. It's like, just show answers only.

Gert: Yeah, absolutely.

James: Just the good stuff, and clearing out the stuff. It reminds me sort of influencers, you know, they might get a lot of traffic or a lot of noise, but it may not translate into buyers. You hear of people with a million followers, but aren't really making a lot of money. And that's because they're getting traffic, but it's not with commercial intent.

So sounds like the first thing to do is identify, what do you want to happen? What's the intent here? What result do you want? Of the stuff on your website, what stuff is causing that to happen that you want, that must stay? And then of the stuff that's left, does it go, or does it get improved? And that's where you might modify, consolidate, etc.

I really like the idea, actually. And I think I'm going to do that one. If I take three or four podcasts on a certain topic, and crunch them into one piece of content, and make a new piece of content, I think I'll actually put the new piece of content. And I think I'll just stone cold hard delete the old content.

I think there's going to be some gaps in my episode numbers, I'm just going to leave the ones that matter, and delete the rest. I don't mind turning off some traffic to just leave what's good. I don't mind doing that. I've done it so many times with products and everything else. I've turned off products that still make an income, but they're not doing enough. So there's like a minimum limit.

And it's actually hard to do that. It takes a bit a nerve, I think, to turn off something that's kind of working but not quite, because otherwise, you actually use your own resource managing this thing. I've had countless plugin updates, and when we change a link, or like when we changed our brand name, we have to go back through old posts and update that thing.

The process of cleaning and organizing

And every time you do a crawl, or I do a crawl, or Google does a crawl on the site, there's just extra lines. I mean, you sent me the spreadsheet of what's performing and what's not, and it's quite an overwhelming task. How do clients deal with that in that situation like I'm in right now?

Gert: We actually help them through this step by step, because like you say, it is overwhelming. I think what's important here is also to understand that whatever content you want to perform over time, you need to refresh and go back to it. So imagine you have 1000 episodes. How are you going to make sure that every episode page gets at least touched probably once a year to keep it kind of fresh, really well converting articles should probably be optimized two, three, four times a year? Try to do this with 1000 episodes.
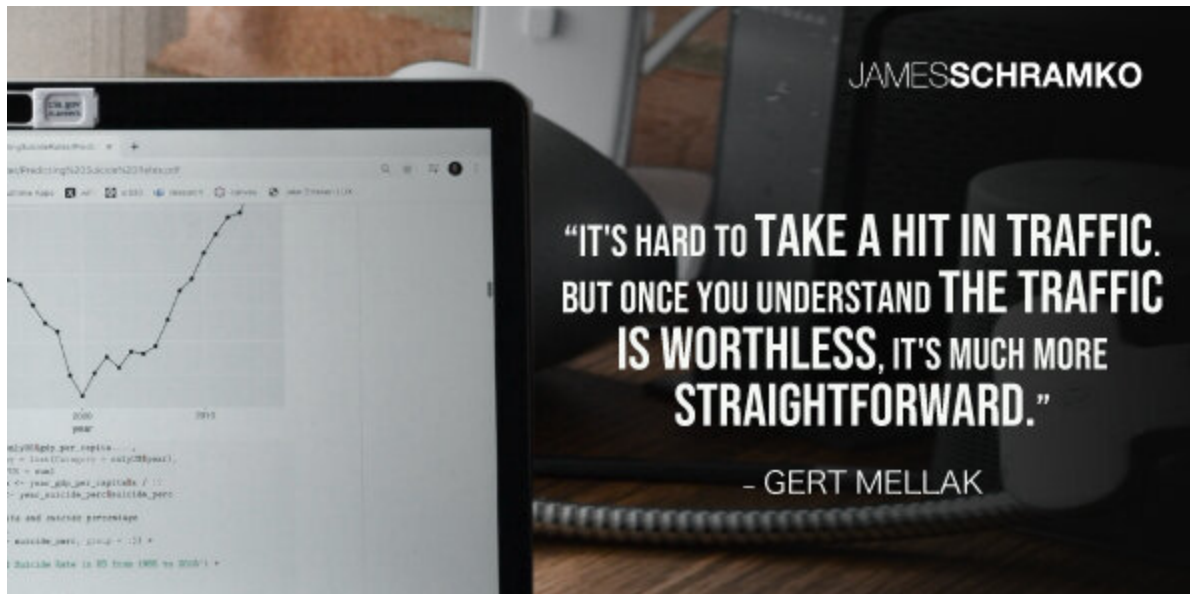
So at some point, clients then reach out and say, Please help me with this, help me prioritize, how can I go about this, it's just daunting as a task. And then we just group this up. I remember the last project, it was an online course, really successful. They got a big growth out of this, just organizing their content and linking stuff together that actually belongs together. And we just defined for this particular project based on what they wanted.

Actually, a filter like we defined with you, where you just say, Hey, this is what I want you to go through. On these 100 URLs, group them up. We even divided up two chunks, they had like two or 3000 URLs, I think, every couple of weeks, we give them a batch of 100. And let's do something with it.

It was in, by category, I think. We had tags, and we had categories. And we had, like certain types of content and grouped it up somehow, just to make sure they could actually work in an efficient manner through this. It's like, now, I'm kind of putting the blinds, I'm only looking at this particular part of the website, getting it cleaned up. Like if you come to a house, and it's completely messy, and you start with the room, let's make this room nice and beautiful.

And now tomorrow, we look at the other room, because you can't tidy up an entire house at once. And this is very similar with a website. So it's about defining filters. Sometimes what we do suggest is to do maybe a couple of weeks of conversion tracking, just to make sure if the data isn't there to help make a decision, we gather it first.

So I might keep up with this mess for another two, three weeks, until I have enough data, and say, Okay, the content that actually leads people to check out your About page, check out your Contact page, want to know more about your products, those are now being tracked.

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So I know which content leads to an engaged audience and which content never leads to somebody actually checking you out more, which definitely helps. So like you say, it's hard to take a hit in traffic. But once you understand the traffic is worthless, it's much more straightforward.

James: That's so true. And you know, even redesigning my site, redoing the words, and redoing the navigation, I just put the page on the homepage of my website, where it has the most wanted action. And now, it's just simpler because we just have one URL to link to instead of sub-URLs.

And you know, Apple does that. Apple, when they advertise, they just want to send people to Apple's homepage. If they have a campaign on an iPhone or whatever, then they'll put that on the homepage. It just makes sense. But it must be so much simpler for their advertising campaigns to just promote their one website.

Internal linking and context are important

Gert: Absolutely, absolutely. And once you have your site organized, it's also much easier for Google to find how things are connected, this is a big point as well. So when we prune, we also try to make sure the internal linking gets taken to the next level. And what I mean by this is, it's not enough to just add new post, add new post, add new post, and to have so much content on my website.

Google has a really hard time understanding, and every AI actually, understanding content isolation. They always need context. And everybody knows from playing with ChatGPT, the more context you give it, the better the result, because it just understands where you want to go. But if you just upload a blog post without context, without linking to it, there's not enough context to actually understand what this is for.

So what happens, it's still going to drive traffic, but it's going to be irrelevant traffic. I had a marketing article rank for puppy advice, I think, advice on how to raise puppies. I have no idea why, it just clicked inside Google somewhere probably. And they drove this traffic, we saw it in the keywords, it was only being driven for a while until Google figured it out based on user data. But you can set yourself up for success, just making sure that you connect what actually belongs together and give Google more clues on how to actually use it and who to put it in front for.

James: Is this much easier for people who are starting out?

Gert: I think it's easier when they have guidance. So when starting out, people are really, they're most leveraged, a lot of people get these days with a site that's taken care of with, like with Shopify with WordPress to a large extent, is really content. So they want to scale content and should scale content as much as possible.

But the problem is if it's not done in a structured way, if there's internal linking, and content structure, and questioning if we need an article or don't need it, isn't built in into an SOP, which is what we help them with usually. They are actually creating the mess and every additional article is making the image blurrier for Google.

James: Cool. Oh, so old content is not going to remain current and has to be updated. It's worth having someone look at your site, like you, to find out how it's scoring in terms of relevancy and if it's easy for Google to interpret what this site is about. And also, if that traffic and the things that are happening on the site are actually meeting the goals of the website owner. Is that something you do for somebody?

Gert: Yes, absolutely. For quite a few people, yeah. I would just take this out on a regular basis, point them directly to content they need to refresh, content we could probably get rid of. And we also help them to understand that wherever people might come into the website, it should make sense for them based on what you're selling.

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So just because an article gets a lot of traffic, and it doesn't make sense for your business, it doesn't do anything good for you. So in Google, it's just going to all affect the reading. And this is where the image gets blurry, where people and Google have no idea what you're doing anymore.

James: And we get in contact with you how? SEOLeverage.com?

Gert: SEOLeverage.com would be the best way to get in touch with us. We have different resources there, an online scorecard you can just fill in, and get an immediate score, and then reach out, and then we can dive a little bit deeper, and see what is actually going on and if there is a chance to help and take this to the next level.

James: Awesome, Gert, thank you so much. Well, I'm off to prune my website, the task is pretty clear. I've got to get rid of this stuff that just no longer serves the goal of what I'm doing. And even though it's going to take a little bit of time and effort, after we've done it, Google will easily be able to find out what our website's about, visitors to my site will know what it's about. And there's way less stuff for my team and me to think about or manage.

So, thanks for encouraging us to do a bit of a KonMari on our own website, the magic of tidying up. And it's a theme that I, you know, I try and do this across my whole life, from wardrobe to surfboard quiver, to domains, to shares, to websites, try and have less stuff. It's counterintuitive, but you really can get so much more from so much less. I reckon someone should write a book about that sort of stuff. Gert, thank you so much.

Gert: Thank you so much, James.

James: All right, this is episode 1051. And we've been talking about pruning your website so that you can improve the SEO results there, with Gert Mellak from SEOLeverage.com.

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Elevate your business plan with insights from James