JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

Losing Money on SEO

Are you spending on SEO but have yet to see any returns? SEO strategist Gert Mellak discusses how to ensure your investment is worth it.

Gert Mellak

James: James Schramko here. This is episode 918. Today, we're chatting about SEO. We've brought along our special guest, Gert Mellak, from SEOLeverage.com. Welcome back, Gert.

Gert: Hi James, thank you.

James: Love chatting SEO. You've been on the show many, many times, you're the guy in our SEO corner, helping lots and lots of my clients, you've helped us. Of course, it's a bit of a minefield when it comes to SEO, and I've been in this industry for a long time now, as you have actually been a lot longer than I have.

One of the biggest problems with SEO

And one of the biggest problems we're having, and it kind of parallels what's going on in society at the moment, is it's kind of hard to know exactly where to get your information from. And it's also hard to know what is actually accurate, or not accurate, unless you go out there, of course, and then, you know, in an ideal world, you'd have multiple test sites, and then you could try different methodologies and see which one works.

That's what we used to do with the SEO business that I had, we did lots of research and development. Then, of course, you've got people who are good at sales and marketing, but may not be actually good at the technical thing. And so you give them the money, but you don't get the results. Then you've got really good technical people who don't know how to market or sell themselves, so they're kind of like a secret, and they might be doing good work, but you'll never hear about them.

Now, I'd like to think you're one of those people with great technical ability, who also has an affinity for being able to communicate the value of what you're doing. But more importantly, let's talk about getting the right information and what's actually effective so that we don't lose our SEO budget. We're not wasting money.

Gert: Absolutely. It is so important. Every day, I have conversations with clients where they tell us, Look, we came across this piece of information. We had read this article, someone told us this, I saw it real, where someone in 15 seconds told us what we should do, etcetera. And this all sounds really nice. And it sounds like a quick win.

And it sounds like, just yesterday, even in an SEO mastermind - I'm a part of two different SEO masterminds to always make sure that we have the latest information - even in the mastermind, we had a guy raise an issue, which sounded like, too good to be true. We obviously, everybody's going to test it on this mastermind. But it's just to make sure that we absolutely know it's just not working, there is no quick fix. And even if there was a quick fix, it's not going to be a quick fix for every single website.

So even what I talked to you about on the podcast, about, is not going to be the best possible solution for every single website. We talked last time about Shopify sites. You can't apply something from Shopify - and you hear this maybe in an e-commerce context - to a membership website or an online course. So you really, really need to make sure that, first of all, the information comes really from a trusted source, and you probably want to contrast it.

And second, that this is actually information that's applicable to you in your particular situation. It's not the same thing, dealing with a new site, it's just starting out with SEO. Or if you deal with a site like yours with thousands of articles, right? Things change drastically.

James: It's true. Like, I've got so much content that's making Google try and crawl it all. And they just say no, we don't want it. So no one even looks at this thing, we're not going to keep crawling that one or give it so much weight. So if you have a lot of content, you're going to have a different methodology. And if you've got no content, which is something you and I were talking about a bit earlier, I've got a new site, a personal brand, which has no content.

And the whole goal of that site is a different goal than the goal of SuperFastBusiness, as it would be different if I had an e-commerce store. And then of course, you've got different platforms that people are using. So as with all advice, you have to make it relevant and specific to the problem at hand. And of course, we can't all go and attend SEO masterminds.

Actually, here's a little funny backstory for you. I met Ezra Firestone through an SEO mastermind, that was our original introduction.

Gert: Oh, really?

James: Yeah, so great networking and great to get in it. But of course, the average business owner is trying to deal with all these other things. They're trying to decide, you know, who their customers are, what they're going to offer their customers, which marketing channels they want to use, whether they're doing paid or organic.
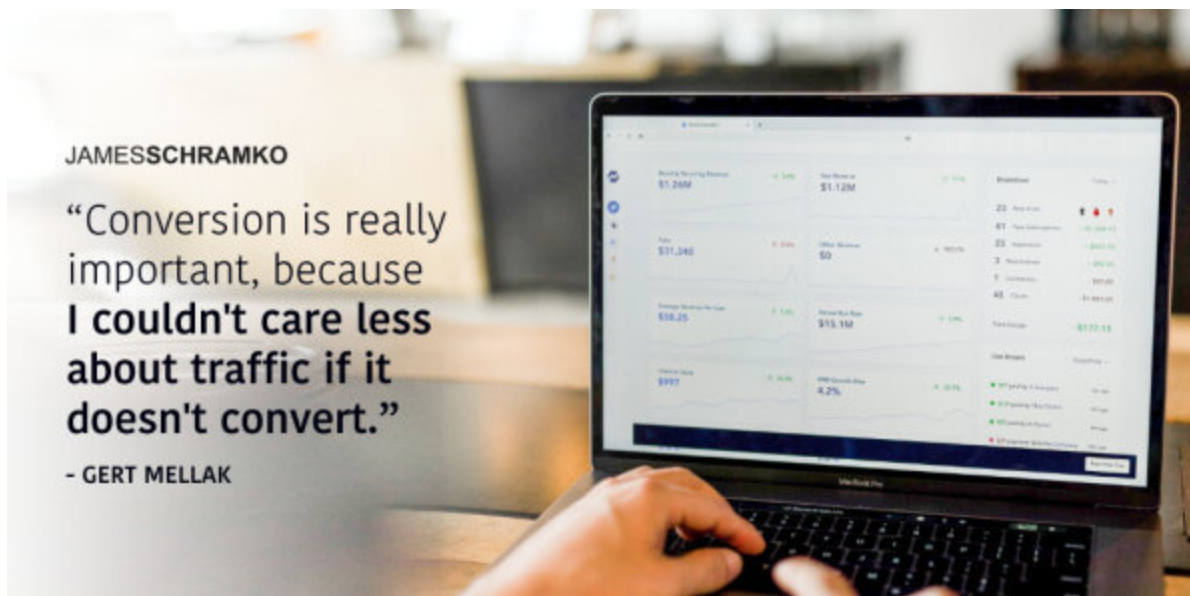
They've got to hire team, they've got to manage all sorts of other stuff, basic things - where to host their website, how to get the money, staying alive from competitors, continually working on their capacities. There's all this other stuff. We can't go to a mastermind for every one of those, we need trusted advisors.

So I guess what you're saying is, whenever we see this new bit of information or this new snippet, we can't just automatically accept that that is the way. We might want to validate or verify somehow, or get tapped into a source that has a consistent ability to deliver a result over the long term.

Knowing where to go for solutions

So what about, how do we know what the right place to go to would be for our particular situation? Because I imagine there's SEO tools, they all publish content, there's SEO forums, they all publish content. But it's just a lot, it's a lot to take in.

Gert: I think you really need to find someone you trust, right? Who can guide you and who understands what you actually want to achieve. I think this is a very important point. So when the client comes in, we have a couple of calls, I have a couple of calls with a new client. And the first call is only about who they want to reach and how we are going to define a conversion.

JAMESSCHRAMKO

"Conversion is really important, because **I couldn't care less about traffic if it doesn't convert.**"

– GERT MELLAK

These are the two points we define on the first call, because the conversion is really important, because I couldn't care less about traffic if it doesn't convert. On the website, if those people don't do what I expect them to do, which is check out my products, get on my mailing list, reach out to me, behave in a certain way where we can track this as a conversion, because we think this is a really interested user about to take action, then we can check, where do those come in, and we can optimize, right?

So you really want to make sure that whoever you trust, you want to find someone who spends the day with SEO, I think, and you actually trust and you know has an overview about different industries, worked with different people in different industries to just know what is going on. And it's not the same thing doing SEO in Italy, or the United States, or Australia.

So sometimes, you find someone who's really good in SEO in Italy, but has no idea how things work in Austria and Germany, right? It's just the way it is. So we are lucky to work with people from all over the world. I work SEO in three different languages. So we have a very good overview, we know which kinds of things are similar, we know when to dive in deeper, because Australia and the UK behave differently in search.

And ultimately, once you find someone who knows what you're trying to achieve, they're going to be able to then assess whether certain tactics make sense even to try, or can be rolled out completely.

When you've invested but not gotten results

James: What if you're already deep down the path? You've already been there, you've found the person, you're doing the stuff, you've made investments, and you've got things set up, but you're not getting the result. I imagine there is a sense of frustration and pain, but also this prospect that you might have to do rework or admit that you're not getting the results you want. What advice would you have for that person?

Gert: It's definitely a big reluctance. And we see this when we talk with clients who say, Look, we have been doing SEO with an agency for two, three years. We just took over a project from exactly a client like this, where they said, Look, we have the process, my team works with that agency, and we follow everything they do, etcetera.

We took this project, and went and turned it around in four months, right? Because we just have a different approach. It doesn't mean we're much better than everybody else. But I think we do….

James: It sounds like you're much better than everyone else.

Gert: I think we're much better in identifying what they want to achieve. Right?

James: That's the bottom line. It's like, what do you want to achieve? Will you tell someone if what they want to achieve is probably not the right thing they should be wanting to achieve?
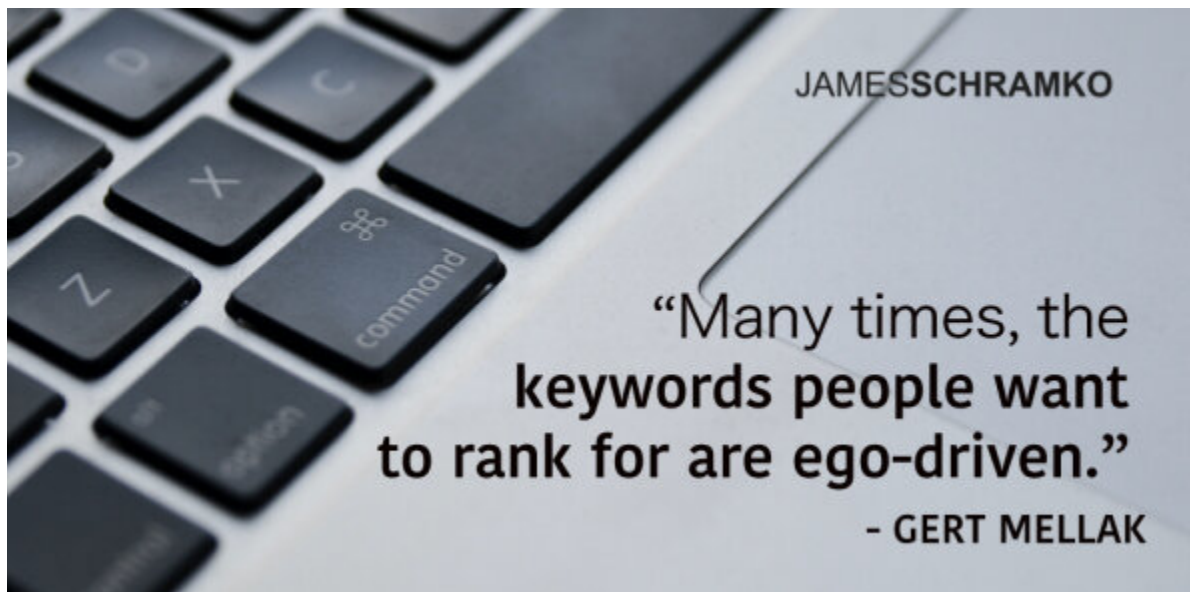
Gert: Yes.

James: Right. Does that come up very often?

Gert: It comes up sometimes. I had a discussion literally two hours ago with a client, where I told him, Look, I have no data to back up that your plan makes sense. And I want him to test it before we spend more money on SEO, on reaching out to sites to get links, on creating content. So they are now going to run an ad campaign, Google ads campaign specifically, in order to inquire more information about whether they keep the keywords they want to rank for are actually going to convert and bring in the right type of client. And once this is confirmed, we're going to go back to SEO and continue the process.

So it was essentially, it was me calling in the meeting. Because in one of my analysis rounds, I just came across data that just went in a completely different direction. And we pointed this out. And we talked about it. Because ultimately, I know, I have lost clients where we brought them to position one that didn't make a sale. So I don't want to do this again because it's a big achievement, and then you lose the client….

James: And just because you probably, they said, this is our goal, we need you to do this. And then you said, Done, and we'd get it happening. And then they're not happy.

JAMESSCHRAMKO

"Many times, the keywords people want to rank for are ego-driven."
— GERT MELLAK

Gert: It's a really big issue because many times, the keywords people want to rank for are ego-driven. I would love to rank for SEO. You type in SEO and SEOLeverage comes up, this will be my dream. But I know exactly that I probably wouldn't get a single conversion out of it. Because it's just general, we don't know what people want when they type in SEO, not even Google knows what they want. So they're going to come up with all kinds of different search results, right?

And this is where we help clients and say, Look, your ideal client, as we understand them, and I literally explain this back to them, I understand that you want to reach such and such person, which is 65-plus and lives in America, and this male, and this person is going to do these kinds of searches, and they should come across your site. This is correct? Yes, this is great. Good.

So then we are on the same page. And then it can make sure that everybody on my team who's going to work, including me, on this project, has a full understanding of what we're trying to achieve. And I think this is then really what separates an agency that's going to act in your best interest from an agency where you're just one more project, and they just apply their standard procedure to everybody the same way.

James: Now, you've spoken to lots of people, you've audited plenty of accounts, and you would have a general sense of what sort of things people are doing that would be a complete waste of money. Do you want to go through a couple of them?

Gert: Absolutely, absolutely. I think this is really interesting, because we come across these all the time. So the first one, for example, is that we see people spend hours and weeks and months and years writing content, and then come to us and say, Look, I have all this content, and literally clients with 1500 different articles, and they don't rank for anything.

We had a client go through their own work of eight years with 900 different articles. And I just asked her to identify what is every single article answering in terms of like, a search, possible search? What is the answer? What is this explaining? Or which user is this going to help?

And she just came back and said, Throw it all away. This was the work of eight years. Nine hundred articles thrown away. Why? Because she never took into account that people who search for something need an answer.

So it's not enough that you know you're the best in your industry and you share your knowledge, and you just share this with the world. It's not enough for SEO. It might work amazingly on social media, I'm not an expert there, but it's definitely sharing experience is going to get a lot of attention there.
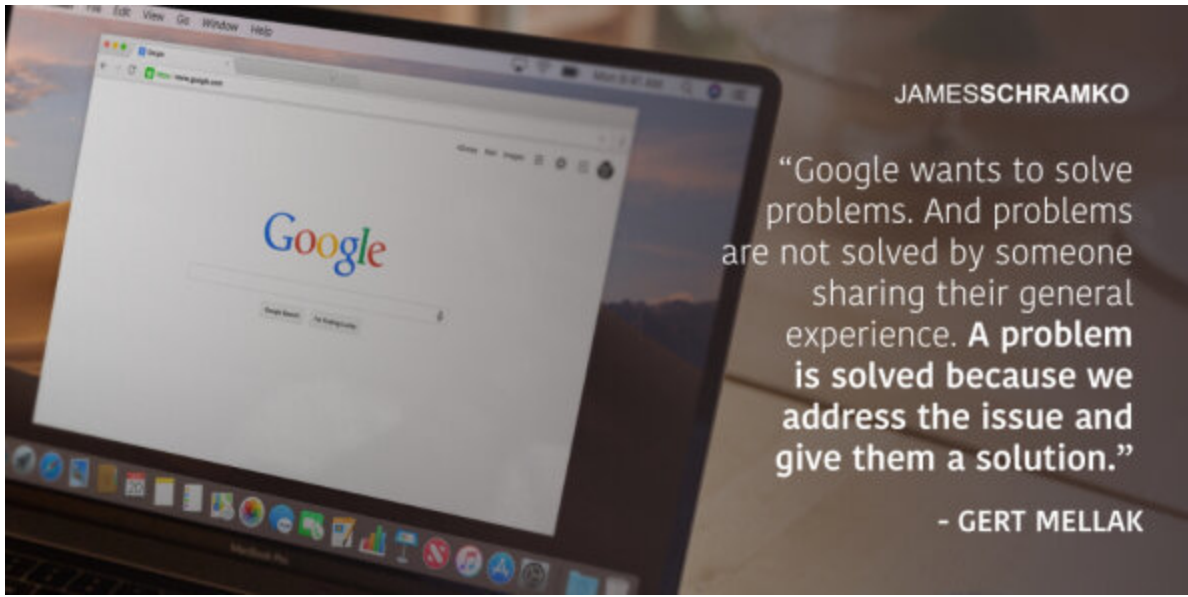
But Google wants to solve problems. And problems are not solved by someone sharing their general experience. A problem is solved because we address the issue and give them a solution. We provide a quick win.

James: So if they'd actually imagine someone sitting at the computer and saying out loud, what am I typing in? To what problem am I typing into Google for it to answer me? they've never actually been through that process.

Gert: Absolutely not, it's just, look, I know a lot about SEO. And I can talk about SEO for years. Without any doubt, probably too much. It's very different when I talk about what I know about Shopify SEO, for example, or I write an article that's how are three things you need to do in order to get your products ranking better. This is a very specific problem.

James: So in this particular podcast, we'll be addressing the problem of people who are wasting budget on SEO, like how to avoid losing money, spending money on the wrong things. It's like someone renovating a house and spending the money on the parts of the house that add no value to it, or the buyers of the house are not interested in.

Like, for example, if you put a helipad on the top of a suburban house where you're not allowed to fly a helicopter, that will be a complete waste of money. Because no one could even use it. Like, it'd just be an ego play. Hey, we have a helipad. Cool. Do you have a helicopter? No, we're not allowed to fly it here. But we have a helipad. Maybe they'd rather spend the money on a kitchen or bathrooms and an entertainment room.

Gert: Exactly.

Creating context by relating internal articles

James: What other mistakes are you seeing people make when it comes to where they're wasting their budget?

Gert: I think the second biggest mistake is that they don't establish relation between different articles. And what I mean by this is that they're really focused on this Add new post that WordPress tells you to click, and you add a new post and you spend a day writing this article or even longer, or you have someone maintaining this for you, or you add, like, another episode of your podcast, your video, your YouTube channel or whatever to your website. And then this article just sits isolated on the website.

And what this means is when your Google and your machine, you scan this article, you see yeah, okay, this article is about, I don't know, how to optimize your investment in digital marketing, or whatever it is. And that's fine. But Google can only understand this up to a certain extent without context.

So the problem, the big problem with artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms, is that they're really, really dumb. Unless they have a lot of context, right? The more context and artificial intelligence an algorithm has, and we can see this today, with tools like Jarvis that create content with an AI engine, they're going to ask you for a lot of things to produce the first piece of text, right?

And then when they run out of context, you need to continue writing a sentence or two, so they know where this is going to go. And then the AI can go in again. Imagine this from Google's perspective. You see an article without any context whatsoever, they can grasp the main concepts, but they don't really know a relation.

But what happens, or what we try to do then, is that we bring articles in context with each other. And if there is an article about email marketing, and they link this to an article about subject lines, Google can understand that email marketing and subject lines are two concepts that are related to each other.

So suddenly, Google is going to find variations where people search for email marketing subject lines, and can rank this email marketing article. And they're going to relate subject lines and open rates, because this is related to the other one. So suddenly, the same article starts ranking for tons and tons of keywords, and we're talking thousands, thousands of keywords, an article can rank for on different positions. And then you have a lot of data to work with for the ongoing optimization.

James: I suppose over time, if you had related articles, you would have opportunities to then link between them. For example, where we publish this post, we'll more than likely link back to our SEO series with Gert. And we'll cluster all of those SEO discussions together. So this internal linking might be a clue. If you've got nothing to internally link to, you may not have related articles or enough context. Are these things interrelated?

Gert: Absolutely, absolutely. The internal linking structure is really, really important and is one of the main things we work with our clients on, on every single project. And there is another point that's automatically related. And this is that links essentially indicate importance and authority. So one article linking to another one tells the machine and the user that this other one is very relevant, and is essentially the authority on a certain topic.

So we talked about SEO and just talked about this article about the SEO series. So Google can understand there is a relation, right? And they can understand that this SEO series that's being linked on your site from multiple different areas seems to be a really important article. So we very often in our app, we call this page importance.
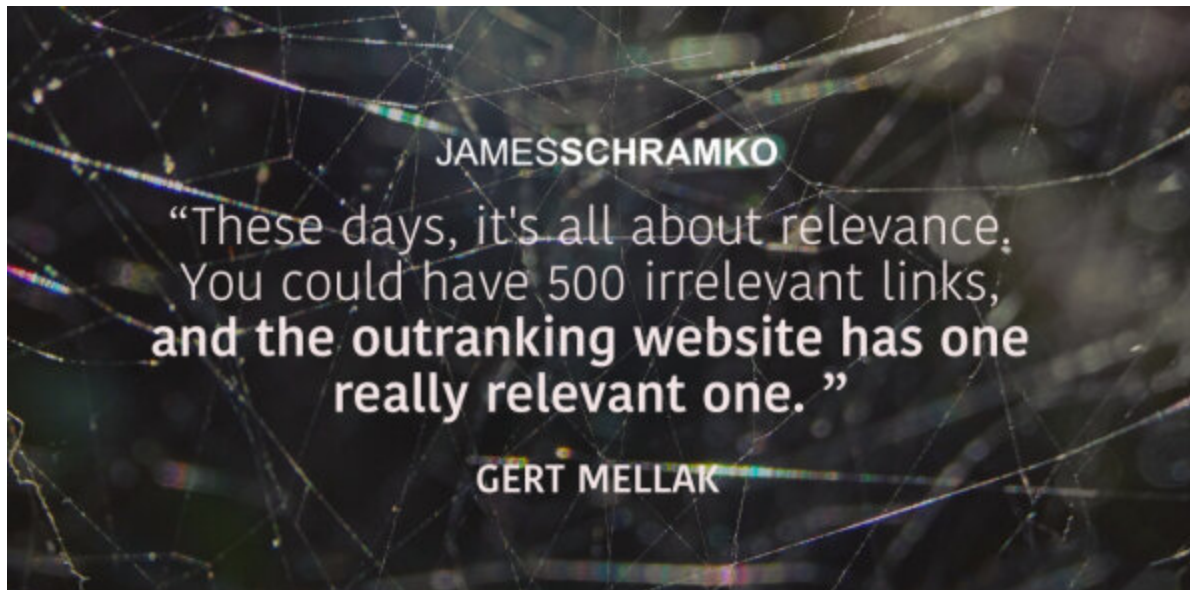
So we calculate the page importance of individual pages. And very often, you're going to find that when pages don't do well, their importance is lower. And what this means for Google is that not even the website itself thinks this article is important, why should I rank it? And on the flip side, if you want to rank something, make sure that you, on your website, link to it from different relevant contexts to show on your site that it's important.

It's not enough to have it somewhere in the menu, in the header and the footer. Use it from the content perspective, and Google is going to automatically figure out this is one cornerstone piece of your site you actually want to rank.

The authority of external links

James: Now, it's hard to have an SEO discussion without talking about people away from your site linking to content too, to show that it's authority. I remember hearing this as like a voting system. If you went and asked 10 different websites, Hey, what's a good source of information for SEO? and they will point back to this discussion with Gert, then that would be a vote for that article, and might help it outrank another post somewhere else that doesn't have 10 votes for it. Is it as simple as that?

Gert: It used to be as simple as that many, many years ago, I've been doing SEO for too many years. It's more complex, but at the heart of Google's algorithm, this game is still about links, right? Links transferring authority from one page outside the page to another page. Google got big because they figured out this page rank algorithm where one page transferred authority to another one and Google just by assessing how the links were pointing from one site to another one, and taking into account a few key sites that are really, really trusted sources, they figured out that this is a very good criteria to rank websites.

JAMESSCHRAMKO

"These days, it's all about relevance.
You could have 500 irrelevant links,
**and the outranking website has one
really relevant one.**"

GERT MELLAK

Back in the days, I'm saying 15 years ago, we had proposal inquiries, where people asked us for 500 links to their website, because their competitors had 300 links, and they knew that if they had 200 more, they were on top for a while, right? These days, it's all about relevance. You could have 500 irrelevant links, and the outranking website has one really relevant one. So you want those links, you want other people backing you up, endorsing you in a certain context, referring to you as an authority, but you want them to be relevant.

James: So there's no point getting all site-wide footer links from a pool servicing forum for your SEO business or something that's completely unrelated business, you know? An e-commerce store for hairbrushes. So, relevant. And it's also, I imagined the, potentially, things like the placement of the link or the attributes of the link and what kind of site it's linked from, you know, a link from Harvard would be worth more than a link from a local grocery store, for example.

Gert: Depends on the project. The local grocery store can be really relevant if you're a local car repair shop. This is where I say advice needs to be seen in the context of the corresponding project. But the best thing you could do could be that you partner up with a local school and do some open day about, let students come to your place and or to your company and try your tools or whatever it is.

And then you get a report on the school's blog, because it's just so hyper-locally relevant. And most of your searches are going to have local intent. This could be the best thing you could do.

James: We used to actually market to the local schools at the Mercedes-Benz dealership, I worked at. We used to take advertising in the local school newspaper, because all the parents at the school, they drive cars and they're in the local area. So I can see how this works in the online space. So hyper-local relevancy would help a local business. Got it.

Gert: Absolutely, absolutely. External links just really matter. Just make sure that they're relevant.

James: What about when we're thinking about page and the way we want to lay it out? There used to be stuff like, you know, the first part of the page, the middle part and the end part of the page. And I remember it made a difference where you put links, and I wonder what the best practices these days are in general terms.

Gert: We have certainly, still, content layout is one of the most important analysis points. And this is something that changes a lot over the years, right? I remember a client coming in with a big traffic drop, I think two years and a half or so, three years ago. And the only thing we did after they dropped after an update was really to rearrange how they presented every site, trying to push the relevant content to the top. And checking a little bit what kind of content do pages start with that rank really, really well.

So it's always reverse engineering of what works, essentially, and applying the patterns you can identify. But if you imagine a few years ago, we had like these full-screen images and videos on the homepage, when every page on top and you had to scroll down, there was an arrow you clicked and then you could scroll down and read the content. But it was really important that there was a huge animation. And this looked really, really good for branding purposes. It just didn't rank, right? And it ranked even worse, maybe a few years later, right?

So if you didn't adapt your website to what people want, Google is just not going to rank, right? Google just is based on user signals. Google wants to make users happy. And users are not going to be happy with the same thing today as they were four years ago, or even six months ago, in some niches.

Where images factor into SEO

James: Nice. So what about images? We used to name images correctly and put alt text, alternative text, for, I think it was for usability reasons. But do they still help?

Gert: We're not so big on names, to be honest, anymore. Because very often the systems, the CMS you use, might change the name. Depends on what you're using.

James: We always used to manually change them. Like, even as simple as when I take pictures for my team of surfboards, in all my research and development that I do, and I load it up for the team to put on our website, I always name the image the same as the board, so that it's very clear. Firstly, it's easy for us to manage our files, but it's also, when they load it up, it's going to go up there with that exact name of the product. So it's extremely accurate. And we do get a stack of search volume for products. So it seems to work pretty well. And especially the image search.

Gert: It's definitely the first step. I think it depends on the industry you're in. If you're in B2B, you probably can put less emphasis on the image search. But if you're in any interior design, or technological space, etc., many, many people search through image search, or then you have essentially what they call universal search, which is where you have your search results.

But Google embeds images, embeds videos. Google gets its context again, in this case, from the image, alternative text and the names, and the surrounding text. So if you're in an industry where image search is big, you want to pay special attention to these kinds of things. Especially e-commerce, for example.

James: Yeah, e-commerce. That's a classic. Every e-commerce store has the exact same product description. I noticed this when I searched for surfboard fins. Or even when the resellers, this is what they do, a lot of them are running their business off Instagram, and they cut and paste the manufacturer's product description off the website and e-commerce stores replicate the manufacturers' product.

So there's literally like 1000 instances of the exact same word - I can tell you the word-for-word product description from the surfboard shapers of a lot of the surfboards because they just get replicated. And that's one of the main things we did, is provide original verbiage for each board, and we outrank the manufacturer for lots of their own boards, because we actually have the only unique description.

Gert: Yeah, it makes total sense, this happens all the time.

James: It's so common.

Gert: It happens all the time. It is, yeah, people just don't go this extra mile. Because I think the main assumption is that they have to do this by every single product, instead of just figuring out of all the products they want to have on the store, which ones are the 20, 50 most important ones. And for those, for a start, they would already get much better results.

How organic traffic plays with paid

James: Let's talk about the interplay then, between paid and organic. Because this is one thing I see, there's a potential that people are putting up with substandard SEO, because they've been lumped into an all-in-one agency who might have originally been their source for paid traffic. And then they're getting a little add-on for SEO, but it might be average, at best, let's say. Let's be kind.

So they may not be looking at these as individual slices of the pie, they might be looking at the whole thing. But maybe they're not getting as much impact as possible. I just want you to speak to the relationship between organic versus paid, because most business owners are going to have some combo or should have some combination of this.

Gert: I think paid is a really good channel, right? Paid search marketing and more aware of the search marketing, social ads work amazingly well. I've seen great things from social ads as well. Paid works extremely well. Right. And paid is a very important channel. I think every business doing digital marketing should have a paid advertising channel and leverage it to the best of their possibilities.

But ultimately, you're going to be depending on high advertising costs, depending of the season of the year, last quarter, everybody knows, pricing is extremely high, doesn't necessarily compensate in January, because people might not have money to actually invest again, or buy again. So even if the ad costs are low, it might not be compensating again.

So we get a lot of those people who come in and say, Look, we have this paid channel and it works really well, we grow the business, we get clients, etc. But we would like to lower the average cost per sale, the average cost per lead by adding an organic traffic pillar that actually works. So it shouldn't be like just something that we tick a few boxes on an SEO plugin. We really want the strategy behind it. We are in there for the long run, and we want to build something up, and we want to know that if something happens to our ad account, people are still going to find us for our product.

And this was a big awakening with the pandemic for example, where people suddenly had their Facebook ads account not returning the normal ROI anymore, because people were crazy and didn't know where to find toilet paper.

James: It's like panic. People are like, my ads have stopped converting. I get this all the time. My ads have stopped converting, the world is caving in. I'm like, remember that boring sort of thing in the background, SEO, that no one's talking about since 2005? Well, that's still a thing.

Gert: I think more than ever, because we have seen this can happen, it can happen that tracking messes up your data and your normal formulas you used to estimate the return on investment on Facebook. We have seen Facebook go away for a day. We have seen other issues as well. And we have seen prices rising as Google wishes.

I think they made, like, 30 percent or 40 percent more money this year than last year just from advertising spend. Not necessarily only about, because of more competition probably, right, so you'd have a huge dependency.

James: It's great when it's great, but God, it's bad when it's bad. I stopped running ads again with Facebook because someone hacked my ad manager's account and they started running ads for Persian rugs or something and racked up thousands of dollars on my account. They were reluctant to refund it. It took a lot of follow up, like weeks. It was a lot of energy burned for something silly that clearly, they'll ban my ads for trying to give away my free book. But they're happy to let this Persian rug guy run the ads. Like, it's this high octane. You need to really be on it if you're doing paid.

I think paid is an essential part of most people's recipe. But what I really want to highlight is how good SEO is. It's just drama-free. Post good stuff.

Two pointers for effective SEO

Let's summarize it in just two sentences, from all the stuff we've talked about. If you're spending money on SEO, what would be the guiding North Star philosophies? Two points, give me two points.

Gert: Create content with an intent to serve the search user.

James: Yup.

Gert: That's number one. And number two is, be consistently executing the right things over time.

James: And how do we know what the right things are all the time? I imagine you come in with some kind of solution here, Gert.

Gert: With a trusted partner, right? It's just really hard.

James: Like you do with us.

Gert: This got so specialized. So I can't be an expert in everything. So you really want to have someone who you trust and who has, like, some sort of proven framework or system that works and keeps the momentum going. Not everything is going to be an upward trend, there are going to be drops. But you want someone who has a system in place to get those things back on track.

James: Well, that's where you come in at SEOLeverage.com. You've got your ERICA framework, you've got your app that tracks all this stuff, and you do little updates for my team, telling exactly what to do. And we get the results. So I'm super grateful for that, of course, as always.

Gert, thank you for coming along and sharing this. This episode is going to be up at position 918. If you want to go back through the transcript. If you're wasting money with SEO at the moment, get in touch with Gert. Ask his team to review your campaign.

Or if you're not sure, ask them to review your campaign. They do have an audit service. It's amazing. Then you'll know exactly where you stand and where you want to go from there. We'll catch you in a future episode.

Gert: Thank you so much, James.

JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

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