

JAMES SCHRAMKO

Making Google's Algorithm Updates Work for You

Google's latest algorithm updates could mean good or bad news for your rankings. SEO Leverage's Gert Mellak tells us how to achieve the former.



Gert Mellak

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to my podcast. This is episode 958. Today, we're chatting with [Gert Mellak](#) from [SEOLeverage.com](#). Hello, Gert.

Gert: Hi, James, thanks so much for having me.

James: We're going to be covering the topic of making Google's algorithm updates work for you. So you're kind of our resident SEO expert. We've had you back [many, many episodes](#). Of course, we know that Google updates their algorithms on a continual basis, every single day, actually, even multiple times per day, in some cases.

Daily versus announced Google updates

So often, in the news, we hear about this certain update. I remember way back in the day, it used to be Panda, it was Penguin, it was like, they get all this sort of infamy around this particular animal name. But they're doing this the whole time. They're constantly tweaking it. So I'm curious to know, is there a major difference between the daily updates and these big campaign versions that they announce?

Gert: It's a really good question. So Google says every day they have multiple updates rolling out, and it just makes sense, because Google wants to make users happy. And everybody listening to this knows, not the same things make you happy today that will make you happy in two months. So user behavior changes, and Google tries to adapt.

A lot of small tweaks here and there, we see them all the time. We readjust with our client's project. But then there are certain updates Google actually announces. They don't tell us exactly what happens in those updates. They might pack a few things here and there in, where we really don't know what it is.

In the past, the Panda update, it was all about the content quality, the Penguin was all about links, we knew those things. These days, Google mostly launches so-called core updates, or also product reviews updates. Core update can be everything, really, we see a lot of things here, put into those updates, product reviews updates, very often target ecommerce sites, affiliate sites, how they present products, etc.

But these are rough guidelines, there can always be additional features, additional signals built in that we don't know about. But it's definitely worth checking those out.

James: Cool.

One of the more recent updates unpacked

So let's talk about some examples of some of the recent updates. I've heard some names sort of coming through the mix. We had the Google core update, we had product reviews update. Lately, there's the helpful content update. I heard about this through you, of course, because you're in our community.

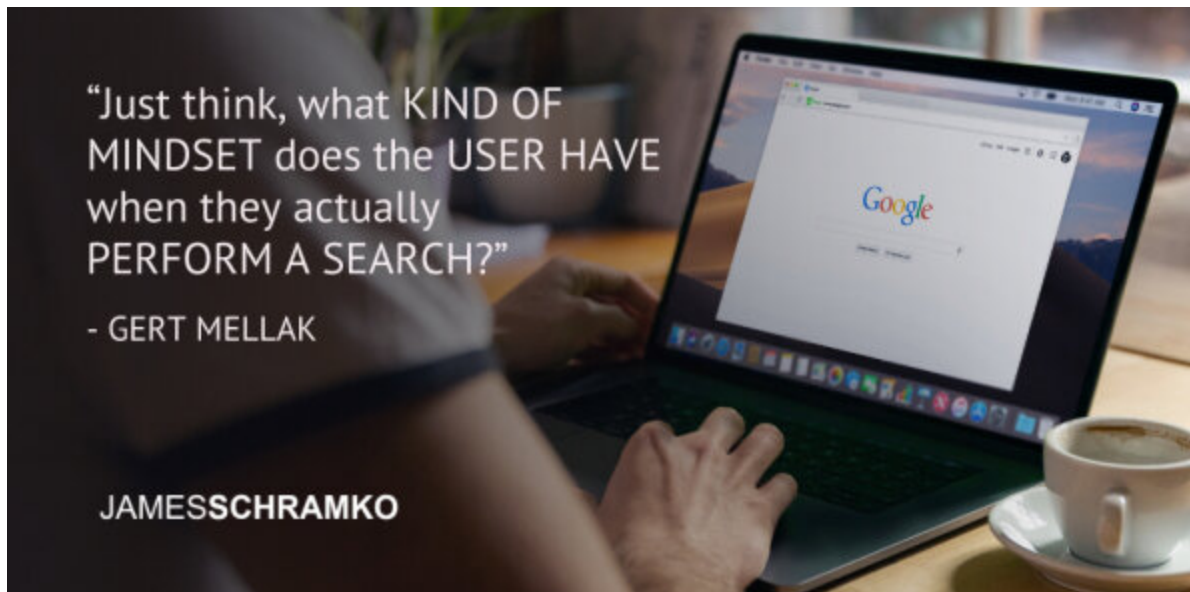
You're sharing this information as it comes through, of course, members of my own community get this information very quickly. And of course, your customers, of which we are one, are getting this advice in the app about what we should change on our website or webpage. What are these campaigns about from Google?

Gert: I think a really interesting one, because they're very specific, is the helpful content update. It was interesting, because there was big marketing around. Google really tries to push hard that there is an update and tries to convince us that it's not so easy anymore to do this organically, pretty much pushing you towards Google ads, which is really interesting, obviously, what makes them the most money.



Really, we know there's still a lot of ways to get SEO rankings and for free without paying for clicks.

But definitely the helpful content update was really framed from Google's perspective, in the sense that not everything you have is going to rank. We're not indexing everything. We're not ranking everything. So really pay attention to those things.



And a few things that are really actionable and we have been trying to push with our clients for years is that they just think, what kind of mindset does the user have when they actually perform a search? So if I come to your page through a search result, am I actually going to find what I'm looking for easily, quickly? Is this a good user experience? Do you walk me through the content? Or is this like a title and a wall of text, or even worse, a title and a video and no text at all, and I really need to figure things out by my own?

I think we really want to make sure that we understand people coming through a certain search query we rank for, have a certain set of expectations. And if we are not meeting the set of expectations, it's not "helpful". So people, what are they going to do? They're going to hit the back button and click on a different result. So the signal Google picks up is that they show something, people choose it, don't like it, go back, click on something else, never come back.

So apparently, the second result they clicked on was more helpful than the first one. What are they going to do? They're going to switch positions. We have been talking about this with clients for years. Now Google finally admitted that this is actually the case, really interesting to see Google just trying actually really to be helpful here and help people figure things out.

James: So there's two parts to that. One that I really picked up from you with the work we've done together is that Google is not going to index the whole site, and they're not going to keep crawling and using up their resource. And I imagine, over time, there must be more and more web pages created.

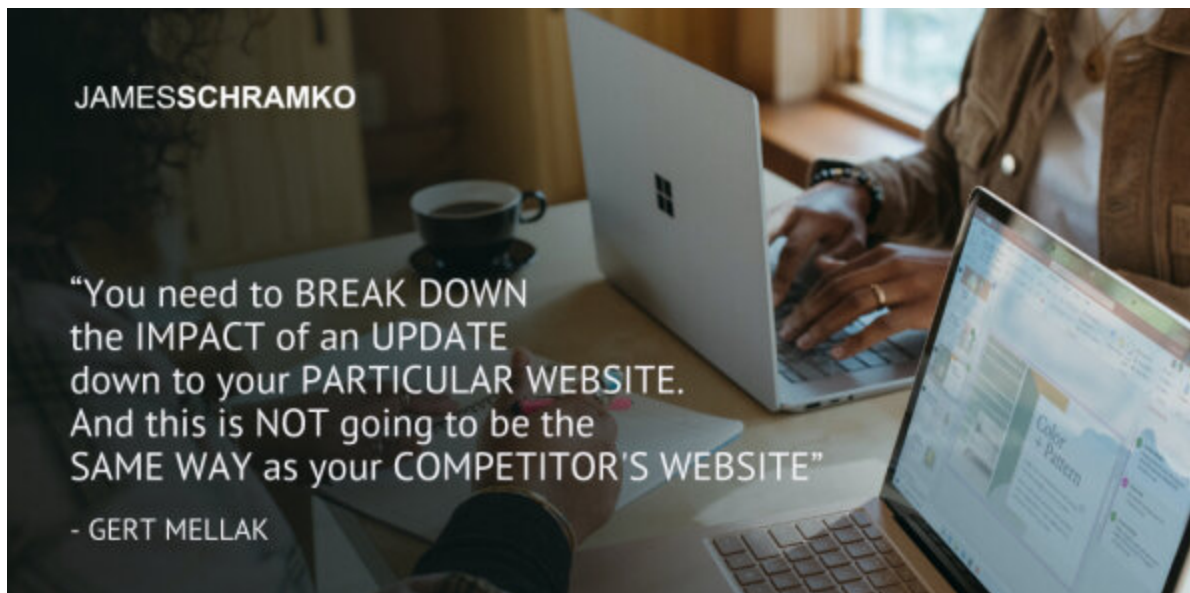
So they have to kind of 80:20 their index and say, Okay, we're going to go and look for stuff that's good. And we'll just stop visiting, stop indexing old stuff. And as a result of that, we had to prune a lot of our stuff. And it made no difference to our actual proper traffic and our proper conversions, because no one was visiting the pages anyway. So there might be a lot of unvisited or uncrawled or low usefulness pages on our site, so we could trim and prune.

Will this update impact my site?

And the second part is that Google is saying, We're really paying attention to usability. How helpful is it? I know there's lots of SEO nerds, they go out there, and they're looking for trends, and they talk about it in forums, and they discuss and debate with each other about what Google's actually doing. But Google never actually publish the algorithm. How do we know that a certain update is going to impact us with our site, with our situation?

Gert: It's really important that you raised this. A lot of people come to me and say, Look, I've heard this analysis from such and such SEO, and it was a one-hour webinar where they really tested a million different websites and tried to figure out what this last update was targeting. And was this backlinks from universities? Was this content on the lower end of the page? Was this footer links? Was it this footer, that....

All those studies are really interesting, I think, for us as SEOs. So I really like to watch those here and there. I don't want to go into this too much anymore because ultimately, it's correlation studies, right? Correlation, meaning there seems to be a connection between sites having links from universities and sites now dropping by 10 percent.



This is not actionable information, not actionable information for the average user trying to get people to sign up for their email list to sell their course, absolutely not. You need to break down the impact of an update down to your particular website. And this is not going to be the same way as your competitor's website.

Your website, in your industry for certain search queries with the content you have with your situation is going to react in a similar way. And this is where it's really important to understand, how did a certain update affect your website, obviously, keeping an eye on the competitive space, but if you drop, you really want to know what's actually happening in my particular space in this particular keyword.

It's not going to help you to look at 500,000 other sites to see what happened to them. You really need to break it down to your site and know, what are you going to be executing or optimizing on your website the next week, in order to compensate, in order to make things better and better? It's what Google actually expects now after the update was rolled out.

James: So how does a webmaster know that their conversions or their website has been impacted? I know probably a lot of people have things like Google Analytics installed. I know in my case, you tell me, which is actually the best thing, we're hooked into your SEOLeverage.com app.

And what it does, it basically tracks the changes. So you're very quick to say to us that there's been a change, or that the latest rollout has been positive or negative. But from my recollection, this helpful update was actually good for us. Are you seeing that across a portfolio of your clients?

Coming up with an effective content layout

Gert: To be honest, yes, we have been building up a certain content layout a certain way to present content on our website, to make sure it's extremely user-friendly, right? So if you look at sites that have been continuously doing well, we can give this definitely a wave. Think about Wikipedia, for example, what's a characteristic about a Wikipedia page that it ranks so well?

So it's not only ranking well because so many people link to it. It's definitely an important part of the query here. But it's also really, really helpful. Why is it helpful? Because you can navigate, you can browse, you can engage with the content, you can find the section you're interested in, you can jump to it, it has great mobile optimization.

So Wikipedia is doing a lot of things well, and what we have done over the years is extract bits and pieces that we have then tested in A/B tests and say, Okay, these are the pieces that seem to really be working well to have the data to also back this up. And we have come up with a content layout, where we say, Look, let's present content this way.

So once you know what you're going to write about, and you actually have a chance to rank for it on target iPhone, on target Microsoft as the keywords, then you can structure your content this way. And people are also really going to be finding it helpful. And whenever we do this consistently on a project, be it a core update, be it the helpful content update, we just see that they always get a little bit of a boost, because there are always competitors who are not doing it this way.

The rudimentary approach and beyond

James: So they're looking at their analytics. I imagine they're looking at things like page visits or you can look into Webmaster Tools, and you can see sort of traffic for words. You could type in some keywords that you think you should be ranking for and see if you come up for it in Google. I know that's probably how most of us start up, just about everyone listening to this would've Googled their own name at some point and see what comes up. So they're the kind of rudimentary ways. What's the next step beyond that?

Gert: The rudimentary way definitely still works. And we have been doing this in the past as well. The problem is that the numbers you see, you really need to know how to interpret them. Many people just take overall traffic, and now I'm getting more or less traffic after an update.

That's like their first step, there are a few people that actually break it down and look at the organic segment, what's actually the search traffic doing? So I ignore direct traffic, social media and all the people typing in my domain name, and then I look at search traffic.

But even there, search traffic is really, really a skewed metric, because you might have one article on your site, one post that gets a lot of traffic, we have clients coming in with hundreds of thousands of visitors to one particular blog post. That doesn't do anything for you. So you really want to make sure that you look at per article that's important for you.

And this is where conversion comes in, where we just try to have a very strong conversion focus and accuracy. There was an update, how did my conversions change after the update versus before the update? And this is where, first of all, in SEO Leverage, we have a feature, let's call it KPI overview, where we just see everything broken down from search traffic to see where people land.

But then we even rolled out lately a specific feature that's called impact update, where you can select the update you want to analyze, whatever it is, you click on the update name, like you click on helpful content update, and you'll see how your site performed before and after that, to really be sure that you're looking at the right thing at the right time.

You know when the update started, when it ended, you know what the graphics looked like before and afterwards and can then dive deeper and really see what has actually changed. Has anything changed? Has it changed to the worse? Do I need to figure something out? And then we can take a deep dive into those specific articles that seem to be affected.

Does everyone get told what to do?

James: So I've noticed that we get told what to do. Is that something that everyone gets? Or you have to figure out from the information what the next step is?

Gert: We have different modalities. So we have people only using the app on their end, we have some training in there. We provide some onboarding training, so they know their way around. In a demo, for example, we have people who come on a weekly call with me and can ask me questions if they have any questions about SEO. Inside there is a ticket system so they can answer, Look I've been hit, what's the next step here? And my team and I are going to go in and analyze this and give directions.

And there are people who come to consulting with us where, month after month, like we do with your team, for example, line up and say, Look, this is the situation. You can see on the app this is going up, this is going down. These are the next steps you should be taking in the next couple of weeks in order to move forward, in order to drive more organic conversions to your site. And then you or your team can work based on these directions.

James: I love it. I mean, basically you end up with someone is keeping an eye over your shoulder telling you what's happened, what to do about it. And then on the next update is like, Okay, here's the progress. So that's how it works for us anyway, and I appreciate it. I'm talking to [Gert Mellak](#) here from [SEOLeverage.com](#). This is episode 958.

We've just been talking about Google updates and how they affect your site, but more importantly, how to know if it's affected your site. Because every time it's reported or all the analysis, it's really just a general overview. It's like that classic thing about averages. You know, the average person on the planet has one breast and one testicle, but of course we know that probably half of them are men and half of them are women, but when you average it, you lose some of that granular visibility.

So it's really great what you put together, it sounds like you've gone from just being a service to being a software plus a service. Is that how you would describe it now?

Gert: Absolutely, it was just a natural trajectory. So we developed the application based on what our clients in our service actually wanted, created those features for them. And are now offering the app with those features, specifically, and the service on top.

How recent updates changed Gert's app

James: What kind of changes have you pulled out of your app in the recent sort of updates? I'm just curious if you can, if any jumped to mind.

Gert: So definitely the update impact was a big one. We tweaked the KPI overview, we can certainly compare a good month with bad month and see where the differences are. We have a change log feature where you can just note down a lot, pretty much what changes you made on certain URLs. And you'll see how these URLs evolve over time.

So you can finally relate an outcome to actual resources put into the website and not just in checking analytics, if it now looks better, but if you have changed 10 URLs, you can track these 10 URLs over time afterwards and see if they are now doing better, and actually calculate pretty much a success metric of what kind of changes seem to do better on your site than others.

James: How do you know which 10 URLs you want to track?

Gert: This is definitely either coming out from the app where you just see certain URLs, for example, getting a lot of traffic, but don't create opt-ins for your mailing list. So you could make a conversion-based change and track how they do. You could have URLs doing really good in conversions, but you need to get them more traffic and then get some guidance from us on how to go about this.

And then you can just really select sometimes URLs that you think should be doing better. And you might want to make, like, a drastic change to them and see if something happens if you completely rewrite them or present them in a different way.

But I don't want to rank for that....

James: What happens if you're ranking for something you don't want to rank for?

Gert: It's an important topic, first of all, to know about it, because there are definitely ways to go about it. You can deoptimize specifically a page, you can work on internal linking to give Google a better idea of what you do and you do not stand for, you can externally link to someone else on this topic or to Wikipedia, for example, to tell Google that there is a better authority than actually your site to do this.

Some people even create a new product because they happen to rank for something they don't have just yet, and to have them add in another product line. I have a client specifically in the construction space who created a six-figure company based on something they happened to rank for.

James: It's nice, it's clever. I was ranking for a while for a term I didn't want to rank for. I interviewed a guest who was very creative. And the subject line of that included phrases that I did not want to rank for that I would never create a product for. And that's what led me to ask that question. But I think it's very clever to capitalize on traffic.

Certainly for me, when I get a lot of traffic for something, it's an indicator that shows me I should make more content around that sort of topic, because it's easy to start linking out to related topics like, you know, that little cluster graph, you're saying, Well, here's the gold, keep making gold.

Is there anyone Gert CAN'T help?

Now, you work with different types of businesses. So when we're talking about results, I know you deal with coaches, online course creators, service businesses, consulting businesses, ecommerce businesses. Is there any kind of business that comes to mind where you feel like you're not going to be able to help them?

Gert: Probably not, because we have been doing a lot of work in 20 years and worked with a lot of industries and got a lot of experience. It is true that we've mostly focused on online courses, coachings, membership sites, these days we don't do, a lot of local SEO work we do it, still, so we have local businesses get some traction, get people into the door. But really focused on courses, coaching, membership and ecommerce, obviously.

James: Way back when I had an SEO business, we used to get asked a couple of things on a regular basis. One is, do you do it in other languages? You know, French, German, Spanish, Italian.

Gert: Right. So yeah, we definitely do three languages at least, even four, very often. So I personally speak three languages, so obviously it comes naturally to me.

James: You do. I know you speak English, and you live in Spain, and you come from Europe. So you've got that sort of extra advantage.

Gert: Right, it definitely comes in handy, especially with larger firms, when you'll work with an international corporation. And you can check out the German website, and I was just checking out the German version of an international site in the legal space. It does come in handy.

We have a guy who's fluent in French as well on the team, which makes it easy to cover France and Canada pretty much completely. So we do some international projects as well, which are definitely interesting because Google just works differently in every country.

James: And not that I'm condoning this or endorsing it in any way, but we also used to get asked if we handled sites that were in sort of more edgy markets, like the kind of markets where Google AdSense would not let you advertise on their site. I'm thinking, I don't even want to say the words. But let's say more gray industries or less Christian-type industries.

Gert: We're definitely not the experts there. We have been doing some work there in the past. But I think it's a different level, it's a different level of investment that's necessary into very often shady links. And it's all really short terms. I'm all about long term. I have clients who have been with me for 15 years straight, renewing month after month. So I'm not looking for clients who want to try something to get a very quick uplift and then next month, we need to figure out everything again.

What to check in case of an update

James: Yeah, cool. Well, that makes sense. So the thing I want to do now is just sort of see if there's any sort of takeaways. What would you say to someone, what advice would you give them, when they see that there's been an update?

Say they're in our community, they see there's an update, of course, you're going to tell them what the update was, and what's likely to be impacted based on the data set that you're seeing. If they were to see it in the news, or some other Facebook group or whatever, what would be their sort of go-to checklist of things to do?



Gert: First of all, I would recommend everybody really track conversions. If you're not tracking conversions yet, in Google Analytics, it is easy to set up. Your webmaster, your developer can probably help you with this. Track conversions, because these are the things that actually matter. And conversion doesn't mean that you have to have a lead magnet for people to opt in.

Conversion can be that somebody checks you out, they go to your about page, they go to your contact page after reading one of your articles, this could already be a conversion. This just tells you how many people of 100 visitors that come to your site are actually interested. And then you can break it down either with Google Analytics or a tool like SEO Leverage, where do those people come in?

So if you have an article that triggers a lot of people to go to your about page, to your contact page, to your sales testimonials, etc., this seems to be a good entry point. And like what you teach in your community, do more of what works. So I like to circle around those articles, and just do more of the content work also on other channels.

So very often from SEO, we get information on what we should talk about in social media, for example, because we just see it converts, right? So if you have set up your conversions, it's pretty easy to see if your conversions changed over an update, over the course of an update, right? Conversions mean other people actually still qualified to come to your site, is the same amount or a higher amount even coming to your site as qualified users?

Or do you suddenly see a drop? And the drop would mean that you're not getting the same level of quality anymore, that Google sends you lower quality traffic, traffic that's more up in the funnel that is not ready to engage maybe just yet. And just see what kind of queries, what kind of pages have been affected, and not just look at overall analytics metrics and say, Yeah, it seems to be going okay, and that's it.

You need to break it down. You have to break it down by URL, you have to break it down by the organic segment, and you have to break it down by conversions.

Know that SEO still works

Important here, SEO still works very, very well. Google has no interest in making you know this. Google has all the interest in pretending SEO isn't worth it and just engage in ads. It's easier. It's simpler. It's faster. All correct.

But SEO still works. So just take what Google says with a grain of salt. They do a lot of marketing around updates to make everybody know how complex this is and how smart they are. We have the numbers to back up they're not as smart as they pretend to be.

James: Yeah, look, I just had a great episode with [Ilana in the previous episode](#), talking about their paid side of things and how you can still get great results by not accepting what they say at face value, right? If they published it, then it would be a different story, but they don't. And we're dealing with machines here, and humans. So there's lots of ways to work around it.

As long as I've been online, SEO has been an interesting topic for me. It still works for me. And that's in large part because of you. And on the topic of doing more of what works, that's why I keep inviting you back, Gert, because I get the best feedback from our clients. You help our own team, so I'm a user of the product. [SEOLeverage.com](#) is where you go, if you want to try out this app.

Gert, do you speak to people, if they want to have a chat to you, if they feel like they have some questions around SEO or want to know if they're going to be a good fit for your program?

Gert: Absolutely. So whoever's interested goes over to [SEOLeverage.com](#), gets a demo, is going to get a call on the call with me and make sure they go away in whatever mode their website is with an action plan and didn't know what to focus on next, if this is with or without SEO Leverage, and we just show how SEO Leverage can actually help them solve some of the issues they have with SEO, if that's the case, or I'm very upfront if I don't think there's anything we can do. Happy to connect and send them some words.

James: Right. And we should say that at the time of recording, you'll get Gert. I don't know in the future, man, you're going to be so busy because I can see your company's growing. It's such a tremendous success story. I'm so glad to have been around to watch this, for you to be a member of our community. I appreciate you very much.

Gert, thank you for sharing with us today.

Gert: Thank you very much, James.

James: This is episode 958 at JamesSchramko.com. You can check out our notes. My team will summarize this. And if you want to see how Gert suggests that my team publish podcast episodes, you'll see the format that he wants us to use that helps us rank for each of the posts we do. So you can check out a sample of it at episode 958 on JamesSchramko.com. Until next time, thank you so much. We'll be back soon.

A person is working on a laptop in a bright, modern office setting. The laptop screen displays a design tool interface with a 'Color + Pattern' section. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing text and a button. The background shows a wooden desk, a coffee cup, and a window with a view of a building.

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