JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

# SEO Testing Methodologies You Can Try

Testing is hugely important in today's SEO. What if you don't know where to start, though? SEO expert Gert Mellak lets you in on methods the pros use.

**Gert Mellak**

**James:** James Schramko here, and welcome to my podcast. It's still fun getting to say that actually now, since we switched over to JamesSchramko.com. And of course, part of that big move, and I mentioned this in Episode 927, was, I went to my sort of trusted panel of advisers and clients, and I thought about it a lot.

One of my advisors, of course, you know, in the small circle of people whose opinions I really trust, is Gert Mellak. My SEO friend, my SEO advisor, he works with us with our team. And I wanted to know, is this going to be something we can do and should consider? And I brought along Gert to this call, welcome Gert.

**Gert:** Hi, James.

**James:** So we've done quite a complex switch across from one website to another, and it sort of triggered some thinking here, there was a lot of moving pieces that we had to roll up into the change. And when it comes to SEO, of course, we've been chipping away at our SEO for quite some time, I think I registered the domain that we came from, SuperFastBusiness, in about 2008.

And we built out thousands of pages and lots of links to it. And of course, we did the same for SilverCircle and for my personal domain, and we've put them all - and we're still in the process of doing - putting them all into one site. And it turns out that it can work, as long as you do it right.

But it did prompt me to think, what other things can we be testing when it comes to SEO? Because it's really good to have an idea of where gains can be made, or if a savage loss, or you know, if you're going to take a huge hit, you'd want to know about that in advance. So I know you've had a foot in the paid traffic side of things, running an agency for many years.

And also, you're of course, very, very keen and enthusiastic on the SEO side of things. And I know you've brought a lot of your paid traffic methodology across to the search engine optimization side of the business. So I'm really curious to know, what sort of things can we test to see if we can pick up better SEO and build an episode around that topic?

## SEO then and now - testing is key!

**Gert:** I think this is great. I just got a little bit nostalgic when you talked about 2008. I was remembering what SEO was like back then. It was almost the wild, wild, west.

**James:** I think it was a bit easier.

**Gert:** It was probably easy. We just didn't know so much about it, so it was still difficult back then. Today, obviously, with today's knowledge, 2008 would be easy peasy. SEO has come a long way. Google has come a long way. And it's funny, very often, we see people publish content with the goal of being found on Google, which is already the first step.

Sometimes we publish content without taking Google into account. But if you already publish and say, Okay, I really want people to find this because I think it's great content, this is the first step, absolutely. And we see, over time, a lot of things have changed, some things haven't.

And what we see very often is that people just really focus on implementing the best practices they have picked up over time, they have seen on YouTube, everybody giving SEO on YouTube is going to have to admit that part of the advice we give is just best practice that has been around anyway.



"You sometimes need to step a little bit out of your comfort zone and do some testing."
- GERT MELLAK

JAMESSCHRAMKO

But a lot of information also comes from ongoing testing. And this just means that you sometimes need to step a little bit out of your comfort zone and do some testing. We have our own R&D department with our own testing sites where we just try a lot of weird stuff where we actually sometimes initially don't really think it's going to do anything.

But sometimes you have a surprise there. And you just want to make sure that this testing thing is just something you actually do, like you were doing paid ads anyway. So everybody using and doing Facebook ads has heard that it makes sense to have multiple copy versions, multiple images, if one image stops working, you test another one.

When it comes to SEO, we see people limit themselves, really, to the best practices they have learned 10 years ago. And like, it's probably still good to have the keyword in the title. And it's probably still good to have the keyword somewhere else. And very often, people are limited to that.
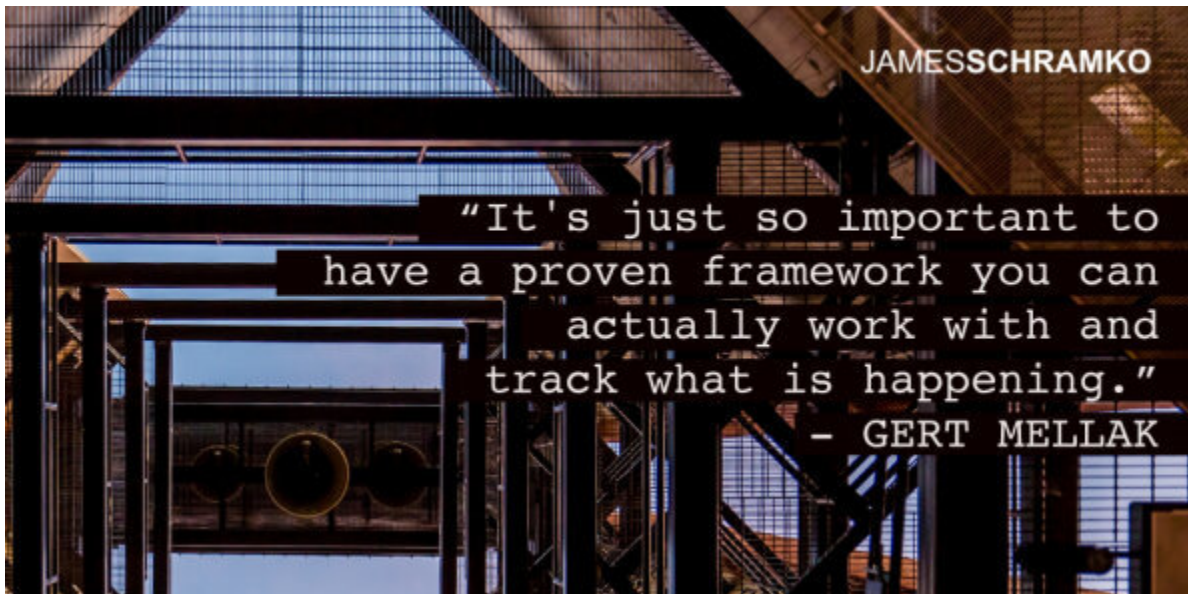


But instead of taking, like, a step back and say, Okay, let's wait a minute, if I was Google, maybe I would value this, maybe I would assess this page differently if that happened as well. And this is where the testing comes in, and where it's just so important to have a proven framework you can actually work with and actually track what is happening.

**James:** Well, you know, you said the magic words, research and development. That was one key to our success as an SEO business back when we had an agency, and I don't think many agencies actually do that. They might read stuff on forums, or they might get a couple of case studies that get published by authors who like to journal that sort of stuff, but they don't have a paid in-house R&D team.

Like, all the big tech companies do this. They do a lot of R&D. If you plan to stay ahead, you need R&D. If you want to improve your SEO, if you want to get off the plateau that inevitably you get to, you get some quick wins, but then it sort of levels out. And then you start to stagnate, then I think it's great to have an SEO testing framework.

It's something you don't really hear about, probably because a lot of people don't have R&D. And maybe they are just happy with that first level of results. But I'm curious to know what you've encountered as a consultant when you've gone to people who are on a plateau and started doing the testing and seeing what happens. Can you describe that?

## What works for them might not be for you

**Gert:** Absolutely. I think it's really interesting, because the best practices people implement, and everybody implements who goes to conferences, etc., it's like a boilerplate solution, which is a one-size-fits-all. And then you have very, very different types of sites in very different industries with very different things that are common and not common there.

So the first thing is that we need to recognize that what we think makes sense, not necessarily makes sense for our website in our particular situation. You might have a big competitor, and what's working for them isn't necessarily something you can extract and imply to your website in the same way as a nine-figure business has different issues than I might have.

**James:** Oh, it's like yeah, you see Coca-Cola on a billboard. You're not going to go out and sponsor a billboard, that may not be suitable for a small online operation. Right?

**Gert:** Absolutely, this is exactly what people do when they come to us and say, Look, I have seen for Amazon ranks really well if they do this and that. And now with my small Shopify site, I want to do the same and get the same results. It's just not the way it works. So there are a lot of things that need to be taken into account.

And very often, you just need to make sure that you can really test, in a safe space with a minimized risk, something that you have seen working before, either on your test site or on our R&D test sites. For example, or very often, we work with roughly 30 to 40 clients at every given moment here in SEO Leverage. And what this gives us is a lot of insights into what can work in different industries.

And very often, we extract something, and then in R&D, I talk to my team, Let's try this one, and let's assemble on that other project, because I think it really makes sense. And Google might be picking this up in a similar way. And then we see something that doesn't work at all. And this can then now be the reason why this doesn't work on this other project as well.

So this is the leverage that we have as an agency that's pretty much impossible to get, apart from all the masterminds and forums, obviously, we are part of anyway, where we contribute with our own testing results, and in exchange, get insight into what other people are testing.

But first of all, it's really important to recognize that wherever you are right now, there is a chance that you're trying to apply something or trying to gain success with something that's just not the right fit for your particular situation.

**When something is worth trying out**

**James:** That's something I picked up from your Loom video briefings to our team in the SEO channel that we run in our company Slack. And I'll hear an expression from you like, you'll show me something on my site, you say, Here's this phrase, this is where you're ranking, here's something that I've seen work well on another site, and it will probably be good for you guys, too. So if you could change the page title, if you could amalgamate these two posts and turn off this category tag, then what we hope is that the site will be picked up and Google will reward it.

And it's uncanny how many times that actually does happen. So I think you having some great data points, essentially, all of your clients are testing sites for you as well, if you see something respond.

I know this is exactly how it works for my coaching, if something's working really well for a client, and then I see that pattern playing out for another client, I can point them in the right direction, say, Hey, you know what, with this, that and the other, what I've seen work well is if you try this. And they often come back and say, Hey, it worked. And I love that, when you have a hypothesis and it plays out.

So what kind of gains have you seen occur when you do this kind of testing experimentation?

**Gert:** Definitely, we have a few stats, I've just put them together before the interview, just to make this a little bit more tangible. It is important to say that all these gains essentially come from our app. So inside SEO Leverage, every client has their application, has their predefined filters, essentially.

So if you imagine Google, and imagine Google Analytics, and you remove everything and just have the five percent that actually matter for your business, this is pretty much the experience inside SEO Leverage. And based on these data points, we then can suggest specific experiments.

**Consider this lead magnet tweak**

And there was one for example, where we saw a very low conversion rate on a very high-traffic site, for example. It wasn't even an SEO advice, but it just came to our attention that maybe changing the lead magnet might be a good idea. And we said, Look, let's test this on one single URL, very limited risk, low conversion number anyway. We tested something and they came from three opt-ins to 30 opt-ins per month within days, just by changing the lead magnet.

And then with this change in mind, we were then able to scale this up and check out other pages and say, Okay, maybe if you bring the lead magnet in a similar direction, taking into account the situation of those other articles, then we can do something without it.

**James:** So what were you doing there? Were you like, lining up the search intent closer to the thing that you're offering, something like that?



**Gert:** We're essentially, exactly, we're trying to make the lead magnet always be the next logical step for a client who came to this particular article. Very often we see people trying to have opt-ins with a general opt-in, eBook, or checklists or something like this, like a one-size-fits-all. Whenever we say one size fits all, probably, we should, like, take a break, take a step back and say probably, I'm not leveraging everything I can actually do. It just happens very often with lead magnets as well.

Here, our specific situation is that have these one-size-fits-all lead magnet everywhere. So if people want to engage, they can engage, but then really dive in deeper and look at those articles that get the most traction. Is there a better way to, maybe, name the same lead magnet? Sometimes you just change the title and maintain the content the same, but people can just better then resonate with this.

## How structuring content can have big wins

Another one, for example, was really traffic gain, an interesting traffic gain. This was a site that has been on a downward trend for quite a while. We're actually still working on this, but we're getting great gains with an experiment. And in this case, essentially, what we did was we picked a sample set of URLs that were converting well, but not getting enough traffic.

And on this sample set, we made a content structure chain. So for Google very often, and we have tested this time and again, it's important what comes first and what goes later in the article. And this is a level of comparison many people are not doing, they're just checking overall, is this pretty much in line with what Google wants? But it really depends on the position of the article.

So we've made a slight change on what really goes at the beginning of this article, not only cue it, but really topic-mapping wise, and got the 22 percent gain within a couple of weeks really on the sample set of URLs. And now we're waiting for the second sample site, we've just expanded the sample then, it's okay, instead of 10 now we build it all on 20 or 30 URLs, and see if we can confirm this again. And it seems like we can.

So then we can say, okay, now let's line all the articles up that have this issue. And let's fix this and get this 22 percent on all those articles as well.

**James:** I imagine then it becomes a filter, and you look for that across any client. It's like, okay, is the article engaging? And does it grab me by the eyeballs in the first few sentences?

**Gert:** Exactly. It's not only the eyeballs, obviously, but also Google is really focused. And we have seen this a lot on what goes to the beginning of the page. I think this came really up with a mobile-first development really where people just are mostly navigating their mobile phone. Nobody wants to scroll down and see if something is being answered at the bottom of the page.

You want to make sure that they at least know at the beginning that this is going to be part of the answer they're going to find, and have them jump there, scroll there or whatever it is. And also make sure that Google can read the beginning of the page like the backside of a book where it says no, okay, if I read the backside of a book, I know if I want to purchase it or not. So the beginning of the book needs to have, the beginning of the article, it needs to have a similar function there.

## Does region make any difference?

**James:** I just had to migrate some of my podcasts, and for one of the platform players that we syndicate to, it asked for a region, and I paused there, and I thought, I wonder if the region makes a huge difference. I often thought that for the first few years, my podcast was always ranking well in Australia, but may have been penalized in the United States market.

How does this relate to location-dependent or independent SEO terms? Like the difference between local SEO or a global business? Like, in theory, I can coach English-speaking countries. Does it make a big difference if you want to try and target locations or not?

**Gert:** This is a really interesting one. We have seen a lot of change happen with the pandemic where people who traditionally had their office, their practice, their environment, physical environment where people would go and visit them, they started to deliver the service via Zoom.

We had one client where I specifically suggested to them to move to Zoom only, because I could just see the SEO potential for this to actually work. So this client was only delivering service in Australia in one city, and he thought he could only rank for his service plus city name. But we essentially then established him in multiple Australian cities.

So now he's getting people from Brisbane, from Perth, from Sydney, from Melbourne, from everywhere, with specific SEO targeting. And he's still delivering the service that's traditionally delivered in-person physically, he's delivering it in Zoom, and essentially is getting more quality leads than ever. Because the site is good, the branding used, everything was great. He just didn't leverage the location aspect of it.

**James:** It reminds me of some of those ads that target, you know, like, Man in Noosa, blah, blah, blah. And then it's like, it's really zooming in. Speaking to that sort of general versus specific, I'm just curious, is Google clever enough yet to be able to rank a single sales page for a course, for multiple keywords? Or are we still in a situation where we should silo out our sales pages or landing pages to bring people in on a more relevant SEO pathway?

**Gert:** It's definitely something worth testing for everybody. We're testing this consistently on every single client. Very often, what we see is that people are ranking with one really big article, getting a lot of traffic. But then when we look a little bit closer, we see many of the keywords the article is ranking for are ranking on page five, page eight, page seven.

Why is this the case? It's the case because this article is a good fit for a handful of keywords, and a decent enough fit for a hundred or 200 other keywords to still sit on page five, but page five doesn't help anybody. So now if you zoom in on those keywords, and say, Okay, if my channel article is already a good fit, let's type in those keywords into Google, and then you'll see Google really wants specific articles for those keywords.

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"Give Google what they really want, not what they kind of like."
– GERT MELLAK
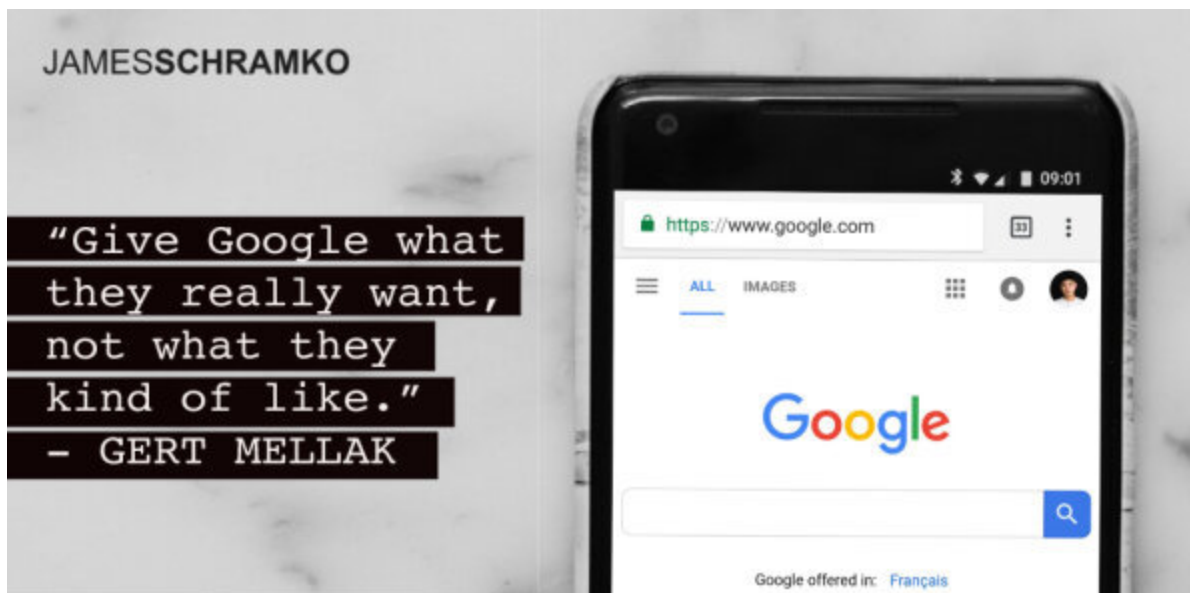
And then you can go in, grab them, put them in onto your website as a specific fit, make sure to strategically link content together so Google can recognize what you're doing. But then you actually get a lot more traction, because you just give Google what they really want, not what they kind of like.

**Take some of the risk out of your testing**

**James:** As we migrated our website, my team were doing test pages for us in a development mode, so that we can sort of have a look at it, and then review it and then say, Okay, yes, make it go live. I'm just wondering, if you've got moneymaker sites or whatever, is there a testing protocol you would recommend where it can sort of ease the burden of a failed hypothesis?

**Gert:** You definitely want to make sure that you test something that you have been seeing working somewhere, be it your existing R&D sites, very often. For example, we just hired four trainees for our team at SEO Leverage. And one of the last tasks they have in their onboarding program is creating a website.

So they create a website, they pick an industry of their choice to create a website, I think we had healthcare, and skincare, and tourism and something like that in the last training round. So we already have a lot of training websites here at the team we work with, and we test stuff there. So whenever I have an idea on a weekend, I might drop this, like, to my team and say, Look, let's test this on one of the sites and see if this can work, right?

So if you see this working on one of your test sites, on one of your competitor's sites, where the competitor is actually really comparable to you, so make sure that you're being selective there, then it makes sense to go to your website and say, Okay, now let's pick something that doesn't impact my bottom line negatively or too much, and really pick a sample only of URLs.

Sometimes it makes sense to pick one URL and just see if this does anything to this URL. On a client right now, with 5000 products, we're going to pick probably 500 URLs with it, because they just belong together and illustrate the same type. And we want to see if this can impact, but it's a low-risk change anyway.

But you want to make sure you essentially test your hypotheses on a low-risk sample set of URLs. Implement it there, wait at least four weeks, possibly even eight. And the reason is because Google needs to crawl all those pages, Google needs to index all those pages, meaning putting the information into the database, and then synchronize with all the data centers around the world. So Google everywhere knows what's actually happening. And then certain changes need to mature.

So sometimes you see even maybe a slight downward trend, until it goes back up much faster. So you need to give this a little bit of time. Okay, so testing, it's important to always be testing, but always have the patience to actually wait for the results to show what is actually going on. And then once you see this has a positive improvement, you can then go back and say, Okay, let's expand the sample size a little bit. And let's test this again. And see, can this really, again, work for a larger sample set?

And if this is proved to work again, then you can consider just continuously expanding the sample set. I'm very much against rolling out something sitewide if it's not necessary, but just slowly expand the sample set to be in a safe place.

**Are some experiments reversible?**

**James:** Now, I remember, we did all sorts of experiments, crazy stuff as well. Putting link building aside, because I know that you could actually really damage your site with the wrong sort of links that may be irreparable. But let's talk about on-site. I have a recollection that sometimes we could change the on-site, and it would drop out of Google, and then we could put it back, we could revert and then it would come back to Google.

I've seen the same thing when website masters turn their site to noindex, nofollow, and the site drops like a rock, and then they switch it back on, and then it comes back. Are some of the tests reversible for the on-site stuff? Does that still work?

**Gert:** It definitely does work. I would probably, I guess, I don't have hard data on this one, I would probably guess that you can only reverse so many changes on your site for Google to give you back the credit. You can absolutely, if you run a test on a sample of 10 URLs, and you get worse performance, you are going to undo the change, right?

If you change your meta description, and you get a worse performance in clicks, you are going to reverse it or try a different one. Definitely Google is going to pick it up. We do also see that sometimes, especially when it comes to Google indexing pages, if you do a change on a large sample set, it can take really, really long to get all those pages indexed. So you want to make sure that you evaluate the data that actually makes sense.

And what I mean by this is, if you test something across 500 URLs, you might have to wait for a month to have those pages really be taken into account, and just to make sure that you don't reverse something that hasn't been even rolling out yet. Because Google is very cautious of what page they crawl, because crawling for Google costs money. And that scale is crazy amounts.

So they have become really cautious on deciding when they actually crawl something. So if you noindex something by accident, it might take Google a while to crawl it again and see if it's now indexable and can be ranked again. There are mechanisms to try to convince Google, but they don't always work to do this, to recrawl faster. So you just want to make sure that you evaluate the data in the context where it makes sense.

## Why switching domains has worked for James

**James:** How risky was it for me to switch my entire property across to a new domain name? Well, a new old domain name.

**Gert:** I think in your case, there are two factors that come together, which definitely worked well. I was just taking the rankings before this call.

**James:** It seems to have worked pretty well, so far.

**Gert:** It works really well. And I think some rankings even improved, or everything around revenue share, I think there's hardly anybody who ranks like you. We see in your case, you switched to a domain that's even having more searches than the original domain. So you switched essentially to a stronger position.

**James:** And it's older.

**Gert:** It's older, it has more searches, it probably gets more clicks, people searching for you and seeing your name in the search results are going to click there. You pretty much have the same website, so just a few components changed on the site, like the homepage and the logo. But everything is still in place. There weren't too many changes.

So a lot of the signals that Google has been picking up over time, they can apply them completely to the new website. Your team informed Google and said, Look, we switched from this domain to that domain. So Google even knew what was happening. It's not something Google had to figure out. But your team instructed Google to understand what is happening and say, Okay, this domain does not exist anymore now, it's this domain, we just migrated this.

Google was essentially informed about the process, we made sure everything was in place. So I think the risk was really minimized. However, people switching domains also can be more affected. And this very often happens if you switch to - I had a client reach out and ask me about this. And my suggestion was against it, because I thought it was too risky.

The new name was like, a made-up name rather than the speaking domain name they had before. And it's automatically going to impact the clickthrough rates. So if you switch from SEO Leverage to Leverage, people are not going to resonate with SEO so much on this name, and they're not going to click in the same way.

And then you don't have your keywords that are often there. The links can get redirected, but might also have a little bit less context. So you want to be careful, you want to do it for the right reasons. And definitely, always a company site migration, site migration can really bring you down when the signals really change for Google.

Google is a machine. And Google just tries to serve the same thing to the people that they're already happy before it. But if the same thing now is vastly different, Google doesn't trust it immediately as it did before. They're going to go back a little bit, drop you a little bit, and then slowly see if this traffic they send you responds in the same way.

Apart from all the technical things that can possibly go wrong, if the redirects and everything is not in place, you want to get someone help you and guide you there. And it's something we do on a consistent basis. We help people migrate and make sure that we do as much as we can, in preparation for this process.

**James:** It certainly made us feel safer having an advisor there, looking at our stuff before and giving an opinion and then us doing it, and knowing that our fallback position would be a revert. But I think we're well past that point now, which is great. We're past the danger zone.

For someone listening to this who wants to get help with their own SEO, maybe run some different tests, get some ideas, have an analysis of how their site's performing, or some kind of audit review, what's the best way to get in touch with you, Gert?

**Gert:** Absolutely head over to SEOLeverage.com. Schedule a free consult with me. We just have a chat, check out your website on a Zoom call, see what kind of potential we can see. And then to see what are the most effective next steps to look into. What kind of tests can we run? What kind of things should we consider, checking out the competitors as well, and then just have a conversation on what is possible.

**James:** And for most people, that's going to possibly, at some point involve some consulting combined with being hooked up to your proprietary SEO Leverage app, which you've put a lot of work into developing, and it gleans great insights, I can tell from the updates you send us.

**Gert:** Absolutely. So the app access is usually like, the baseline is access to the app with some ongoing support from my self and my team. And then there are different support levels depending on how much guidance and consulting and strategy you actually want in this program.

**James:** I love it. It's actually fitting that this episode's number 928. That's the same sort of model as a German motor vehicle. I'm getting that sort of accent through. So we'll put this up here on JamesSchramko.com, episode 928.

If you want some ideas for testing for your SEO site, it's definitely worth trying. You might get some incremental gains. If you get the support of someone who's running tests all the time, has a professional R&D team, and is seeing what's working across a lot of data points, i.e. clients in the app, then you will get a bit of a leg up and an advantage.

I look forward to our next discussion, Gert. Thank you so much for coming along and sharing with our audience.

**Gert:** Thank you so much for having me. I'm really looking forward to the next one.

**James:** Awesome.

JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

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