JAMES**SCHRAMKO**

What I Changed to Get SEO Firing Again

As SEO constantly evolves, so must our strategies. Join James and SEOLeverage's Gert Mellak as they look at changes to rekindle SEO success.

Gert Mellak

James: James Schramko here. Welcome back to the James Schramko Podcast. I think it might be the first time I've said that, I'm not sure. I want to say my podcast, but I think this'll be episode 1034, and we only just heard from you last episode. So we're on a continual SEO train here. And I wanted to talk to you about what you're seeing out there in the SEO landscape that might be interesting.

A lack of understanding

Gert: Yeah, absolutely. And James, thanks for having me here again. Really these days, I have had so many calls with people who want to improve their SEO, and I'm actually getting a little bit frustrated these days.

James: Why is that?

Gert: It's because I feel people are missing, like, what it's really about. They kind of come from the latest event, they follow some guru, they are all the time on TikTok, hearing the next SEO suggestion, and they just go hand this over to their team to implement and say, Now we don't need to do this. Now we need to do that.

And then they come to us. And say, We've been doing SEO based on what the gurus say out there for two years, and we're not getting anywhere. And this is really frustrating, because it's kind of this theme that repeats itself all the time, where I say, Something is off here.

James: Is it because people are focusing on tactics? Or is it because experts don't know how to do it themselves? And maybe they have good intentions, but they're just giving out some ideas? Or is it because people aren't taking it seriously?

Gert: I think it's probably a mix of everything. So first of all, people definitely think it's something you can do on the side. And it's not the case. So you do SEO, you want to get SEO results, you need to be all in with SEO. You can have all other channels and should have other channels, but SEO you need to take it seriously.

But then again, it's obviously more sexy to talk about tactics and say, Hey, I have this hack. And this and that. I just got literally five emails from different people in my inbox today and said, this is the latest SEO hack. It's so easy to get more visibility. Nobody cares. It's not going to bring any results, right?

"How many conversions are people getting from this organic channel? How much exposure does the brand get from this channel? This is ultimately what counts."

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JAMESSCHRAMKO

And results meaning, for me, a result is a conversion. It's not that individual ranking of one keyword suddenly jumps up a little bit. It's really, how many conversions are people getting from this organic channel? How much exposure does the brand get from this channel? This is ultimately what counts for me.

And this is where I think people when they just focus on this latest hack, first of all, they shift all the time, they might not even consistently roll out one of those hacks that are supposed to actually work for you consistently, they might just do it on a few articles and expect next day that everything is going to be better and their business problems are solved. So they might just start all the time something new.

And then the second thing is we just know a strategy is missing, right? And people are not even really sure what SEO strategy actually means. They might be telling me what they did. One of my questions that I ask on calls is, what have you been doing lately for SEO? And then they list all these tactics, right?

And they say, Hey, we highlighted this, and we changed this, and we changed that. And we internally now link three times from every article somewhere else, etc. And I'm like, Wait a minute, where are you actually going with this? What do you want out of SEO?

James: So you bring them back. Of course, SEO Leverage has their own process. You've been in business for a long time. Chatting with Gert Mellak about this. Frustrating, frustrating for you to hear that. It must be frustrating for them to hear that what they're doing might keep them busy or might have some internal cost in terms of resource, or maybe they've even paid people externally to do stuff. But they're not getting anywhere.

If they'd talked to Gert earlier...

How would they have known that this wasn't going to work?

Gert: Sometimes I could have told them two years ago, before they started doing something consistently. It is very often also the problem with SOPs, right? So they just find the hack, they say, Okay, we put this into an SOP. This is what we're going to rinse and repeat because it sounds really good. And then the team is going to blindly do what they're supposed to do, which is what is in the SOP.

If you don't have somebody in the space that kind of checks, does this actually make sense for you, first of all, is this actually aligned with your overall business goals? And then, is this still valid, because what we were doing eight months ago is definitely not what we're doing today for a large portion of SEO, we're just moving that fast. So it's just this doing the same thing and thinking this one hack is going to solve everything is a big issue.

We have seen people lose tens of thousands of dollars, literally, like just random math for them with the team costs and content creation costs, etc. Whereas if we had talked two years ago, I could have told you that rather than do this, you could focus on these other three things, probably with the same or even less expenses, just to make sure that you actually head somewhere and put your train tracks where you actually want to go.

James: Yeah, and I agree with you that the landscape changes, we've seen huge changes in the landscape. In the last year, there's a lot of discussion, especially if you're on platforms like LinkedIn, where there seem to be carousels about their new SEO outcomes, and the new software they're using, and the way they're doing keyword research, and the way they're building pages, or they got all this traffic.

Again, could be a bit of a magic trick, like maybe getting traffic may not be the ultimate goal. Ranking for a keyword may not be the ultimate goal. And then you still see the old stuff that's been going on forever. I get people emailing me asking if we can pop a little article on our website linking back to them. And it's clearly a nice little template they've been using. Or they want to exchange links, or whatever.

I had a client ask me today if they should be doing blog post swaps with another person in their market. I mean, that's been around forever. So there's really old stuff, there's really new stuff. Can get a little bit confusing in terms of how to lay those train tracks.

Telling people what doesn't work

And when you say you could have told them this before, what does that conversation look like? How do people get this kind of intervention, or advisory at the early stages?

Gert: We have a couple of ways where we try to avoid this happening to people. One is that we do quick wins reports for clients, they can purchase this from the website, go to a website, get a quick wins report, we check out their website, tell them a little bit about the low hanging fruit we see and where we would start. And then very often, we then have a conversation afterwards, and then say, Look, if you're not doing anything else, do this step or stop doing this, because it's just messing everything up.

Literally, we had this case several times where people were down the track and really scaled up in the wrong direction. And then obviously, for existing clients, when somebody joins our program, and we have verified that we can help them, the first couple of calls is really about, where do you want to go? How do we think SEO can actually help you? What are you actually doing? How do you create content? How can we interfere in this process to make sure that the effort that you spend on content creation actually pays off in a few years?

We had a client literally spending eight years in the wrong direction, creating content in a way that was never going to help SEO, never. It was just expected because it's content. It's something their audience liked, so they expected ranking.

James: Was it me? [laughs]

Gert: No. It wasn't you. I think with the transcriptions, you were partly guilty and we had to change something here.

Changes in James's SEO

James: Yeah, I mean, look, we got into a good groove. We built a team, we were doing a lot of podcasts, and we transcribed all of them, word for word, even before the tools made it easy. We did it by hand. Someone in my team would listen to the podcast, and type it out, and then publish it on the website. Because back then, it was supposed to be good.

Google finds this amazing resource of all these words with all the exact same language that we talk about. I mean, the words coming out of my mouth were transcribed onto the page. I could literally say keywords, and they would be put on the page. And I think for quite some time, it worked particularly well, we had a lot of search engine traffic from it.

But now, anybody could - well firstly, they could actually have the AI write the podcast, and they could have the AI talk the podcast. And most definitely, with tools like Otter, you can have it fully transcribed. Or even Loom, it not only transcribes, it actually titles the content and gives chapter time points.

I've been doing those timeline points since 2005 or 2006, right from the beginning. It was a client of mine called Allan. And Allan said that he has difficulty learning, and he doesn't want to go through a 60-minute webinar to look for what information is in that webinar. So would we be able to go through and just itemize the timeline of what's occurring at particular time points, right?

So we've manually did it. Well, when I say we, me. I was doing webinars in 2007, 2008. I was a very early user of Go To Webinar, and I would manually pull out the timelines and put it there. But all of this stuff is fully automated now. So you came to us and said, Stop doing that. There's no need to put the full transcription up there.

I think we still actually provide the full transcription on our download page. So anyone listening to any of the podcasts, they want the transcription, they can grab it where the episode is, there's a link to it. But we do have a summary, which I think is actually way more useful anyway. And I still think we're pretty much doing this manually.

We're summarizing what the episode was about, and we're putting that. And that new format has been pretty effective. And I'm very pleased to actually announce, this is a world first, Gert, we published a video on YouTube yesterday, or today, today, that addresses the topic that you've asked us to target for a key phrase that you know generates sales for us.

We put that video up there. And we're now going to create a page on our website to embed that video and to put a description of that video that will bring in traffic. So this is the more modern approach. But I'm definitely, you know, hands up saying we did it the way that worked for too long until someone tapped us on the shoulder and said, Hey, you know what, it's different now.

And I'm very glad that we've got access to be able to find out what's different. But also, it's not about ranking for vanity keywords or keywords that maybe we used to rank for, but don't generate the right type of buyer for us. And that's becoming more and more important, the clearer I am about what I sell, the more important it is that we get the right buyer coming to our website.

The stuff that really counts

But you look over my website, and I think you've seen that we still get a good chunk of SEO traffic who turns into paying customers, and that's what it's all about. Right?

Gert: Absolutely. And I definitely want to give a shout out to you, obviously you, but also your team, because we very often face a lot of resistance when we start changing stuff. Where I say, Hey, what you have been doing for five years is probably not what should be done anymore for this and that reason. And then sometimes, we even run experiments where I say, Hey, let's do these 10 differently and see how this works. So we get some data behind it.

"If somebody is really used to doing something in a certain way, there's always going to be resistance."

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Just because obviously if somebody is really used to doing something in a certain way, there's always going to be resistance. And we're really happy to work here with your team that are open to every single suggestion and extremely fast implementing, which ultimately also shows in the results, right? So if it takes me three months to implement the change, or a week, there must be a difference, right?

But yeah, we see this vanity, those vanity keywords list where we had two calls yesterday, where people came to me and said, I need to rank for this and that keyword. I already have a few longtail keywords like multiple words in the keyword I rank for, but I need to rank for this head term. And this is usually where I lean back and say, Let's try to see where we actually want to go. How much of this desire to rank for this particular keyword is ego-driven? Because I just think I deserve it after 20 years in this industry, I should be ranking there.

And then I also think, who is actually going to type in this particular head keyword. Right? How ready are they to buy? Do they just want to know what your industry actually is about? Do they want to work in your industry? Do they want to hire someone from your industry? Do they want to look for competitors? Or is this actually a buyer making the search?
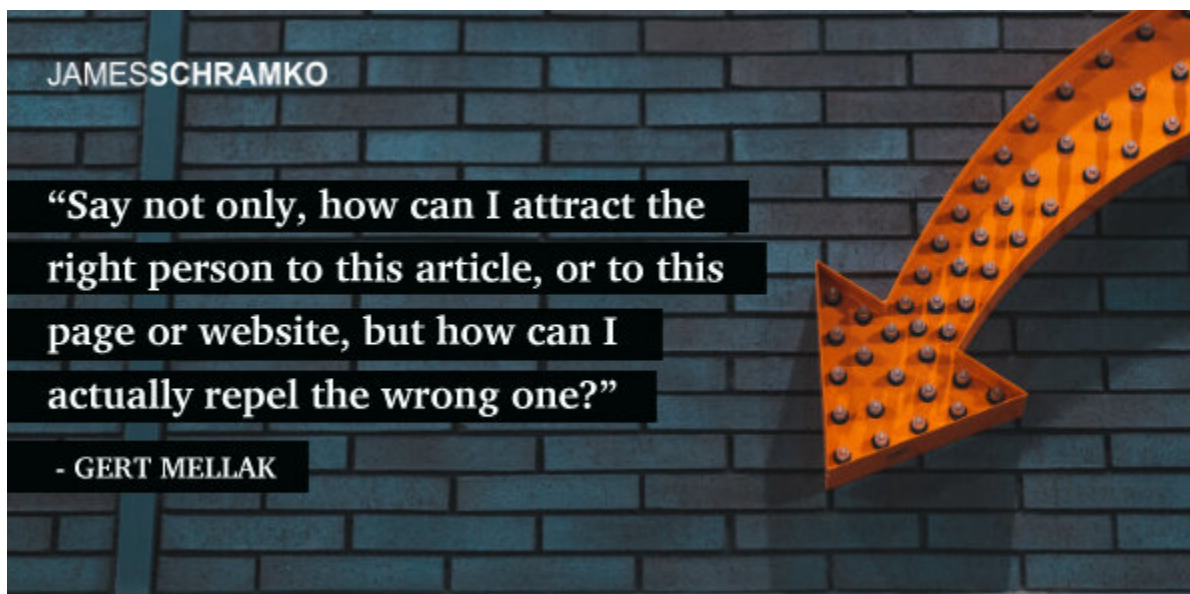
So very often, I try to flip things around and say not only, how can I attract the right person to this article, or to this page or website, but how can I actually repel the wrong one? What should I not be talking about in order to get the wrong audience in? We had a particular example where somebody got, I think 80% or 85% of the wrong traffic.

We were able to check this in their so-called Google Search Console, where we see what queries are people using to come to this website. More than 80% were the completely wrong audience. They just resonated with some random articles their team and their students actually published on like, a user generated content section on their site, which completely skewed the entire image Google head from their website, they suddenly turned into a magazine, rather than staying laser focused on what they actually want to sell.

Has Google published their criteria?

James: That's an interesting one, a couple of points there. One, we touched on the interaction between team and agency. So I want to address that. And also, we talked about what Google likes and what Google doesn't like. Have they published their little algorithm yet to all the SEO agencies?

Gert: Not yet. They just say, hey, we changed it.

James: And they keep changing it, right? Every day or so.

Gert: They keep changing it, they say, Hey, we changed it again, and we changed it again, and they change it every day without announcing, and a few times a year, announcing it. The way I always explain this to people, especially when they think it's like one or two hacks that's going to turn everything around, I usually talk about filling buckets. So I say, Hey, there are probably 200, or maybe 2000 buckets you would need to fill, right? There is a bucket for speed, there is a bucket for content, there is a bucket for usability, there is a bucket for links, internal links, external links, all kinds of things, design, you name it, right?

And out of those, let's say 500 buckets, we, as SEO agencies, know about 30 of them, right? And those 30, we need to always fill. And filling for me means we zoom in to speed, make sure speed is right. We zoom in to content and say, Okay, we are still in line with the content Google wants to rank, we zoom in to internal links and say, Hey, is this actually all tied together?

But every bucket has a hole. It's leaky, we need to revisit this thing. And this is where SEO results really love consistency. You need to consistently revisit speed, because there might be a server change, there might be a WordPress update, there might be a new plugin installed, it slows everything down, or anything out of your control, but you need to revisit it.

You need to revisit how you create content, because it's not going to be filled up. And you can tick this box because it's changing all the time. You need to see, what is the user experience doing now that we have a new panel or a different design or a new plug-in. Is this still user friendly? So you need to go through all those things.

We obviously, after over the years, have developed a framework around it so we don't forget about individual buckets and really do those things. But it's never just one bucket, right? Whatever site comes here with a traffic drop or consistently declining traffic, it's never just one thing that you just turn around, and now everything is going upwards again.

James: So it might be they've changed server, it could be they did a website redesign, it might be that the style of content they've been doing for a very long time has become less favorable, it could be that they have paid for some gig on Fiverr and managed to acquire a bunch of really bad run of site links from some crappy website with a bad reputation or poor neighborhood, as you call it.

It could be that their new intern decided to try white text on a white background, because that will surely make it rank if you just type the keyword 50 times on the page. That doesn't work, by the way, I'm just being totally facetious here.

Gert: Thanks for clarifying. [laughs]

James: Most people, like, that's telling me you don't know about SEO without telling me you don't know about SEO when they ask that question.

Automated, or manual?

So there's a few factors. Do you have software that keeps these things in check? Or is this manually done by a human?

Gert: It's a blend of both. So we have developed over the years our own SEO Leverage platform, every client has access, and they see the dashboard, they see what is actually working. And first and foremost, also, they see what change actually does to their results. So if we change and optimize an article, they see how much better is this particular article now after this change.

So you can really zoom in and say, do my actions actually lead to better outcomes? And not just globally assess how much traffic do I get and what are my individual rankings, but really, these five hours I spend on optimizing this article, is this now bringing this article to a better place? And then we have our team of internal strategists and consultants who jointly work on every project and say, Hey, in the next couple of weeks, what is really the most important thing here, what's going to have the highest leverage?

How to determine what's useful

James: How do people protect themselves from hearing something from an expert or guru or watching a video or seeing someone else do something, and being able to assess if that's useful or not?

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"We need to keep in mind where we actually want to go."

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Gert: I think we need to keep in mind where we actually want to go. Am I already on a path that was developed with a strategy that took into account where I want to be in a certain moment in time, took into account where I started from, and is actually guiding me, and I have like, my train tracks to this particular goal?

Or is this just really like, could this be maybe just ask the question, could this be this shiny object that's distracting me, because this latest TikTok video, these results just look too good to miss out on it, and then I just jump on it? Just always make sure that you have somebody you trust in your corner that's available for a conversation about things like those.

Our clients very often might reach out and say, Hey, I was in this digital marketing conference there, and they talked about this. Is this something that we can do? Very often, this might be already something that we are doing that we're just not aware of it. And sometimes, I would say, Hey, let's maybe run an experiment on it. Let's pick 10 articles so you see how this change applied to your particular website in your industry will actually work out.

And then we decide whether we make it part of what we do. Or very often, we just drop it because they then understand with data, it's not this one thing that's going to turn everything around, but sometimes they want proof. But really, it's important to think that you kind of take everything you hear with a grain of salt. Because everybody out there can pick one thing that's going well, and create an entire video out of it from one single project.

And this might even something that happened by accident, not even something done intentionally. And they might present the latest hack to get a few views. Just also question, what is their goal with it? Right? Is their goal to get views and follow us on socials, because it's just so good that it might go viral? Or is their goal to just show consistently their expertise, and show, Look, this is what I have done. This is why I've done it. And these are the results that I'm sharing.

James: Nice. So when you're seeing results come from clients, you start to pick up trends and patterns, and then you can start sharing that.

How Gert works with his clients

I want to go back and address that other question about the relationship between agency and end user. I know how we work together, you plug into my team and you guide them with the coordinates.

You say, Here's what we've observed. Here's what I suggest you do, and then my team have to do things, and they do and then they update it. And then something happens, the results come in. We go up or down or whatever, stay the same. And then we can reassess. And that's going on a continual basis. Is that how you work with other people?

Gert: Yes, for the most part. So we have more and more people who do want to outsource more of their SEO to us that might not have a bigger team, so it's my team. We're almost 30 people right now with writers and link builders and consultants and implementers. So where they just outsource the entire process and say, Look, ask me whatever you need for my industry. And I'll give you guidance on the articles, I'll revise them, etc. But I don't want to be actively involved in the process or manage a team.

So this is something we see more and more often. But we also still have some, especially like course creators, coaches, that are actually just looking for guidance. They say they have a team, they have a notion of SEO, but they want some guidance. And then we just plug into their team and work with their team directly.

James: How long do you normally work with people?

Gert: We never have, like, a fixed agreement. So we work month after month and try to adapt also the methodology of how we work together to what's needed. I literally just send an action plan to a client who wants to join us where I say, Hey, we do one month of consulting, then we create content for a few months, you get your website set up, and then in a few months, we talk again and look into doing then an audit, and maybe some ongoing link building, etc. We just really draft this based on what we can do, and on where the client wants to go and when. We draft, like, an individual strategy.

James: If someone's interested in working with you, would you ever point them to other clients you've worked within a similar industry or type of business that they could glean some results from? Or are they super secretive?

Gert: We have a confidentiality agreement, obviously, with every client. We can obviously share what kind of things we have done in the industry, or what kind of results we got in the industry. That's always interesting. But then again, it's ultimately, it's SEO, it is true that certain industries are very different from others.

So we're not experts in Casino, Poker, I don't know what those kinds of spaces, we just don't have the experience. And there are agencies who only do that, because this space just works drastically differently and very aggressively. But then a lot of different industries work in a very similar way. It's always about, what does Google want to show? How am I set up for this? How are my competitors setting themselves up? And how can we bridge this gap?

So we would probably talk in general terms and say, Hey, we have seen these kinds of things working but we never like, put one client in touch with their competitor. Very often, there would be competitors anyway, if they're really, really relevant, they would be competing.

James: Gotcha. And are you able to service clients in a similar market?

Gert: Absolutely, absolutely. Because every single website is different, right? Even the same SEO tactic or even an oral strategy is going to work differently on a different brand. Just because the way people engage with a website with their offering, etc. also is different. So it's not going to be like, you do the exact same thing on two sites that compete with each other and get the same results.

It usually doesn't work this way because there's always a lot of difference in, how long have they been around? Where do they get links from? How do they write content? They have a different writing style, a different design, etc. So it's always different.

The things that help a buyer decide

James: How could I decide as a buyer? I mean, it's great that I'm getting results. But if someone else wanted to find out about it, are they able to see case studies? Or any kind of proof? Or do they just have to hope that you're as good as it sounds like you are?

Gert: [laughs] We do have case studies on the website, right? We do have case studies on the website. Usually, in any case, it's, I usually ask people to just have a conversation, like, tell me where you want to go, I kind of tell about some examples where we probably have achieved something already.

We have case studies on the website we can go through, and I can explain some additional context about this. What was the situation about, and how did this client actually react, or how did their team work this out? And then we come to an agreement, right? SEO, there is no guarantee for SEO, we need to be clear about that. Like, my personal trainer is not going to give me guarantees how many kilos I'm going to lose. If I follow the diet, I probably will, but it's not going to be guaranteed.

So this is where you definitely need to build up this trust, where we have people following my stuff, probably for two or three years sometimes until they say, Now I really think we are ready. And whenever somebody is ready, it's time for a conversation where we confirm, can we help or not based on the experience we have?

People who left and came back

James: Have you ever had someone talk to you, you've told them what you think the situation is, they went away and didn't buy, did their own thing, and then came back later?

Gert: Yes. Multiple times.

James: Tell me about that. What does that look like? I'm just very curious.

Gert: This was a funny one. I have one good story here. This was with two women coming to my office, I had basically an office back then. They were coming with an idea, they were going to sell secondhand luxury clothes. Oh no, sorry, sorry. It was secondhand clothes for children, etc. Not luxury, right?

James: Well, you can still have luxury clothes for children secondhand, that is probably a category.

Gert: Yeah, but the interesting thing was it was like clothes, but secondhand clothes, and especially for children. They were both mothers, they understood the struggle and wanted to build something up. The interesting thing was one was an engineer. The other one was at Wall Street, or was it, I think it was Wall Street.

And I had some experience there. And they came to me and I'd literally calculated on a spreadsheet in the first meeting why their business wouldn't work, because just the numbers didn't work out. You can't sell a T-shirt for $2 and make a profit. At scale, it's just not going to happen. So they just went away really frustrated.

A day later, I get an email and say, Hey, thank you. This was important. And I didn't hear from them, I think, for two years. And then we did some e-commerce support, etc. They reached out again, say, Hey, we did it the other way around. We went for luxury items like $800 purses and stuff like that.

Now the numbers worked out. And they actually made a business, and I think I last heard from them during the second investment round or something like this. They were looking for financing. I don't know what happened to them. But it was interesting that they reached out and said, Hey, based on your feedback, we were actually building this thing to a completely different structure.

And this is very often where SEO is like the entry point. But it becomes a little bit of marketing consulting. Sometimes as well, it goes broader. We check out other channels for clients, and give them an opinion. And this might just really save this.

Even yesterday, I had a call where I said, Look, we shouldn't be talking until you have figured out this, this, this and that. Because it was just too early. So people might just say, Okay now, let's also do some SEO. But if they're not ready, they don't know where they're going, there's no point.

James: Wow. About 20 years ago, one of my wealthy clients offered me half of his business. He had three motorcycle franchises, or offices, like big buildings, full of motorcycles. He had Kawasaki, Suzuki, one other I think. And I spoke to my accountant, and I also hired a lawyer to look over agreements, to check the agreement, it was like a heads of agreement.

And my accountant set up an entity, a Proprietary Limited Company, family trust, to put in the heads of agreement. And then at one point, they said, Stop. You can't go into business with this guy, because these buildings are all underwritten by his other company, which is a construction company. And it has big debts, and if he can't pay them, then that will just suck all the money out of this business, and you'll have no place to trade.

And I'm like, Wow, you know, I wish they'd told me that $7,000 ago. However, I didn't end up having a motorcycle dealership business, I ended up with my online business instead, with the same entity that I'd already paid for in advance. But sometimes, most often actually, it's way better to get your idea stopped in the very early phase, even if it costs you a bit, and pay for information, pay for advice.

It's a huge part of what I do as a sounding board, is I stop crappy ideas straightaway, by pointing out the very obvious to me, but had not been considered by the other person. And that's where a spreadsheet can be helpful. That's where engaging in a conversation with someone who has deep experience on a topic in the early phase will be well worth it.

Does it cost a lot of money for someone to chat to you, Gert?

Gert: No, they usually, they just schedule in a call with me on SEOLeverage.com, we have a little bit of an email exchange just to see if this really makes sense for both parties. And then we hop on a call and just get to know each other, connect. I hear what they're about, what they're looking to do. I can tell them what we think we could do or not, or point them elsewhere as well.

Wrapping up the episode

James: Love it. Well, as always, I appreciate everything you've done for me. And also, for my clients who have always been happy. Everyone I send, they come back, they say, Thank you, Gert's the real deal. He's getting us results. I'm so happy. That's how we ended up becoming partners. I just said, Gert, I really love what you're doing over there. Is there any chance you want to work together and see if we can combine knowledge and go out there? And so, it's been such a great union and good product. I think that's the key, having great product.

So there you go. That's the SEO strategy covered. I think it's still worth playing the SEO game. And I think it's worth having a good strategy. Even if you know what to do, and then you know who's going to be doing it, that's a huge start over just trying to slap together some bits and pieces from the odd conference or a course you buy here and there. And definitely stay away from the bandit suppliers who are clearly spammy or too cheap or doing something nefarious. That's going to harm you more than anything else.

So Gert, any final thoughts for someone on the topic of SEO strategy?

Gert: I think, just make sure that whatever you're doing with SEO, you really know where this is going, what this actually should support you in doing. And if you're not, let's have a conversation or just really sit back and say, Okay, is this actually worth it? Or even if I continue and not getting results, how much money am I actually wasting? Just to be aware of where the resources go. And then say, Okay, can we do this in a better way? Can we actually head somewhere?

James: Love it. Thank you so much, Gert Mellak, SEOLeverage.com, Episode 1034. We will have a show description though, if you want to see what we do, based on what Gert told us to do, go and type in 1034 and Schramko, into Google. It'll probably come up, and you'll probably be able to have a read of what we talked about here and just see exactly how that works. Until next time.

Take your business strategy to the next level with James's help