Ex-Booking.com Head of SEO: 1,000 experiments, 3 rules | Julian Redlich, VP @ Permira

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Show notes

Julian Redlich spent around six years at Booking.com, ending as Head of SEO, while the discipline there grew to roughly forty people across development, design, copy, analytics and SEO. He now sits on the other side of the table as an investor at Permira, looking at organic growth across a portfolio that includes mobile.de, Kleinanzeigen.de, Squarespace, Zendesk and Flixbus.

That combination is rare. Dozens of companies cross his desk every year, which means he sees patterns across business models most operators only ever see one of.

My 8 biggest takeaways from our conversation:

1. The number one thing that worked at Booking.com was being able to change things on the website.

Not analysis. Most teams he sees spend the overwhelming majority of their time analysing, building internal decks and fighting internal battles, and only a few percent actually making a change. Adding content, creating pages, fixing the technical foundation: if those three are unblocked, you grow. Watching Search Console go up and reporting that it went up is not the work.

2. Three conditions decide whether SEO works at all: management support, peer trust, and access to the site.

If you lack top-management backing you spend your life re-proving the channel. If your development or data peers do not trust you, you stay in defensive mode. And if you cannot change the site, strategy is the only thing left to produce. When SEO stalls it is almost always one of these three, not a missing tactic.

3. Scaled landing pages only work when there is enrichment data behind them.

The Booking template was a database crossed with a pattern: hotels in {city} across roughly 230,000 cities, then the same again for around 600 regions. But a page for a village with no available hotels has no right to exist. That constraint is the whole difference between a large site and a thin one, and it is why "we need one perfect article" was never the strategy. A hundred thousand good pages bringing one click each beats one article.

4. Test on as much traffic as you can, not as little.

The instinct is to isolate an experiment in one small market so nothing breaks. Booking did the opposite: expose a big hypothesis to large traffic, get the signal back fast, keep it if it turns positive and kill it if it does not. A single blog article is usually not worth experimenting on at all. Experimentation earns its keep when the website is the product.

5. Failed experiments are the point, not an embarrassment.

Across roughly a thousand experiments plenty did not work, including a widely believed pagination theory the team tested at scale, which went nowhere because Google had quietly stopped using the signal at all. Every experiment that fails removes something from the list, so the list gets shorter and the remaining bets get better. Every experiment at Booking was peer reviewed, and product managers had to review other people's experiments as part of their own review cycle.

6. Delete the laundry list. Ship the one thing.

The complaint he hears at every company and every conference is that IT will not implement the backlog. His answer is blunt: delete the list, work out the single change most likely to move the site, and get that one shipped. Half the problem is self-inflicted. Stories are over- or under-documented, and SEOs routinely ask engineering for the wrong fix because they have already assumed the right one is impossible. Give the development team the full context of the real problem and they will usually solve it.

7. He hires on business acumen, communication and craft, and looks for people who build rather than opine.

Business acumen means understanding how the site makes money and how much your channel actually moves. Communication means being able to explain your three priorities to a C-level and to a junior. Craft is tested against the specific site type, because marketplace SEO and content-site SEO are different jobs. The disqualifier: arriving with a Lighthouse score to raise from 55 to 60. He wants to know whether you understand the demand in the market and can show relative share against competitors over time. He also still rates candidates with their own side project, because breaking your own site teaches you what does not move the needle.

8. The generative AI risk is ultimately a Google risk.

An opinion he formed back in 2022 and still holds. Google has the data, the decade of AI investment, and distribution across a stack of apps with billions of users: everything needed to do what ChatGPT, Claude and Perplexity are doing, better. On the super-app question his read is that customer behaviour changes slowly. The same fear was attached to Facebook becoming the place people shop and book, and to mobile-first destroying conversion rates. If it happens it happens gradually, with leading indicators in faster-moving markets, and that is when you react.

Also in this episode: how to size whether SEO deserves a place in your mix at all (if paid search works for you, organic probably matters too), and the keyword-universe method he uses to judge a market. Pull your competitors' keywords, pull their competitors' keywords, bucket the whole universe with an LLM, and compare share by commercial-intent bucket. Under a couple of hundred dollars in credits.

Let's connect

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Full conversation

[00:00:00] Many of these ideas that grew the domain came from designers and developers, analysts... ...and not necessarily the SEO people. I think SEO were a bit like a guardrail or guidance being okay with things breaking or failing. That's really important to our culture. where does this strategy creep

come form? And why do people tend get less hands on more supposedly complex business website? I think it is because The foundation is probably not very well figured out yet. Let's just say the number one thing that worked at booking was... Before we dive in, you're listening to the Masters of Search podcast with me your host Niklas Buschner. Each week I sit down with some of these smartest people around the world and SEO & AI search To bring their strategies, mental models And top pieces of actionable advice.

[00:00:53] If you enjoy this podcast, don't forget to like and subscribe. And follow it in your favorite podcasting app or YouTube! It helps us get top-notch guests... ...and create the best possible content for you. Let's dive into todays episode. My guest is a true SEO heavyweight. He spent more than five years at booking.com At the end as head of SEO Helping turn him into one of biggest websites globally. Now he sits on other side of table As an investor at Permira digging into organic growth across a whole portfolio of companies including mobile.de, Kleinanzeigen.de Squarespace Zendesk Flixbus and others And that's what makes his view so rare. There are dozens of companies that cross his stack every year with data and patterns most operators never see.

[00:01:43] So today we'll get in to what it was like building up SEO at booking.com What the companies have in common that has strong organic growth motion, how SEO talent is changed over years and he thinks about AI search. Welcome to the podcast Julian! Hi Niklas I'm really looking forward to this. Thank you so much. Full transparency. we're doing a second attempt today. quick shout out because Julian has actually purchased a new audio interface just to make this work. Julian, special thanks for that. I think this shows your true commitment probably not only through the podcast but everything you do and then just finished at story. no one had it on stock. none of the stores in so client side can actually solve this.

[00:02:29] for me was okay half an hour drive from here and i got another face there. This is completely unbiased recommendation And you are not commercially incentivized at all to say this. Okay, cool. so let's start with the elephant in the room and I know You will say it was not a unit loan. It was a team but still what? Was building up SEO at Booking.com like yeah definitely a team sports a team sport. So booking dot com is This enormous brand in In twenty sixteen that has kind of Done some SEO. There were people before that worked on a domain, of course but it was never one their main priorities. Booking fairly early figured out how to spend in Google Ads very well and turn basically the traffic from there into conversions.

[00:03:23] And for SEO they weren't ever that big on at the beginning. Then there are two or three people I think who started initially. One of them is a developer that pushed the channel, then they got some external talent in. I remember Leonardo and Susan came in. there was before my time And they started basically building a foundation. They started to do their first landing pages. Imagine booking being at a visibility index of like seventy or something. So the statistics visibility if that maps it bit better for the SEOs right? There were some core landing pages. so you looked for hotels City, hotels in London, hotels and Berlin. And so on. you would have landing pages for it but a lot of kind more narrow terms like Hotels with pools In Berlin or Hotels With Pools Or Hotels Would Beachfront.

[00:04:17] Many Of These Terms Wouldn't Be Served Yet. So You Have This Very Strong Brand That Has A Good Technical Foundation But Just Like A Huge Gap Towards The Market There Was An Insane Amount Of Volume Out There And that wasn't necessarily tackled with dedicated landing pages. Most of the stuff was running on parameterized versions, and so therefore it was often not indexable... ...and a few versions were indexable. they changed very often. So there just didn't have really good footprint. Booking then prioritised SEO little bit more I would say in twenty fifteen or sixteen And that's when basically the teams grew. That's what they got from these initial smaller teams into, I think at the

end maybe like forty people who would work in the discipline.

[00:05:05] It is not all... Like. it isn't for the SEO people or anything. It's developers, designers and copywriters. You have analysts, you have of course SEO people as well. But all these disciplines basically work together on building a landing experience for customers that's just superior to other websites' learning experiences. So once your in the website we kind of romanticize this little bit. but imagine...you're having an idea booking trip with friends with your friends group and finally made it into the WhatsApp Group. And now everyone is writing about it, you're very excited like okay let's go to Croatia! You start going to Booking.com or any other website To book your travel. Now basically faced all these decisions that we have to take So not just when do we get to Croatia but also when?

[00:05:57] Do want a beachfront place? Is it three stars four stars five stars with breakfast without break first parking. You have all these different decisions that you have to take all of a sudden for large group of people, did he usually never take? It's not like in the morning when you choose your clothing or what to eat during the day. also these are decisions you take every day and we had a little bit routine at. But things like booking a trip or larger travel to a new place. That's the new decision. and And then thinks that stress people enormously once they're sitting in front of a computer To actually put things into action, don't forget there is lot money involved In the end right? Like a trip isn't cheap it always means significant spend for People.

[00:06:42] so The thing was people were basically searching For Things They Were landing on website had this idea. now they got face with all these different decisions at their to take. You basically move from this extremely happy moment full of endorphins all the way down to being extremely stressed because you have to take all these decisions for first time. Then, do your research phase and then in a circle... These are three hotels that we believe were best! And now it's making on top of their list. so there is back-and-forth all the time All until you press the booking button. The moment when you lock it That's when your this whole feeling reverses again and you're getting back to all the endorphins And all happiness, and your texture group.

[00:07:28] We did it. we booked It is gonna happen its these dates that hotel beachfront and so on and Our goal was really to basically bring these two moments of first happiness Of yes? We booked a trip too. We booked The trip as close as possible To each other and and cancel out that anxiety and stress moment in between Basically And that was something the booking got really good in because they had so much traffic to test this on. Every little experiment we ran would just focus making one of these goals happen, and it's what you have. a bunch smart people there as I said analysts and designers and developers etc., most ideas made booking big at end or grew up. so much in SEO wasn't because an SEO person decided I don't know, changed some skewer markup or so.

[00:08:19] It wasn't... Most of the time it was not the SEOs that were there who said this is number one thing we should do now and its going to outgrow everything. but always some developer came up with because they are looking at code every day like They see what's happening. You dont need a go-to developer that understands the code very well And tell them look i found on this page The marker breaks little bit. Can you please fix? a developer looks at it systematically and they're understanding, okay well if it breaks there probably breaks for other things. so let's see how big this problem actually is. And their saying ok maybe on twenty percent of all my pages this markup broke? Then that can feed back. in the case its much larger than you thought shall fix or prioritize.

[00:09:03] then theres a back-and forth happening. but what I want to say? many ideas grew from designers developers analysts not necessarily SEO people more like a bit of a guardrail or guidance, I don't know how to really frame it. But they were very important in the mix. but was definitely that team and people behind came up with these ideas or brainstormed together and challenged each other. so

good on that sense. I know that i have to quickly dig a little bit deeper here because the SEO people and marketing leaders listening to this desperately want to have nuggets they can apply in their daily doing so either an individual SEO manager or contributor, core factors of success for you. And I loved how you painted that picture off imagining the customer journey, but still can you so this is my duty obvious obviously here?

[00:10:16] What Can You Give Me That I Can Extract For People Listening?". So... I love that! Let's just say The Number One Thing That Worked At Booking Was Changing Things On The Website. It sounds very simple, but most people out there that I'm working with or they see are reading about online. They're taking all this time in analyzing things building internal decks communicating internally and fighting the little challenges inside of companies. But then Out-of-this hundred percent worktime maybe two to three percent is spent on actually making a change. And so the number one thing that worked for booking was just being able to change things on a site. That means adding new content, there were creating new pages and it was I guess fixing the technical foundation.

[00:11:15] It's those three things if you're able create new pages or change content in place If these three things are in check. You basically start growing. What doesn't grow is just analyzing all day long and looking into the search console, seeing something going up. And then reporting that it goes up... That doesn't grow! I feel like for some reason we think this is the SEO work but it became such a minor part in my opinion to the whole thing. there needs be much more focus on actually making changes. Now before you go into the other success factors, let's quickly zoom in to that one. Why do you think this is the case? So why do you thing? some people will basically say oh yeah That way too simple just changing things on the website we have a line of strategy and then Really dig into screaming frog and then cross-reference with GSC and big query and blah, blah.

[00:12:19] Why do you think that is so? where does this let's say like strategy creep Come from? And why do people tend to get less hands on the more supposedly complex a business website Get? I think it is because The foundation Is probably not very well figured out yet. So it could be. It could be one of three really. so one thing is if you don't have any support from your top management on Your channel You will end up having to prove every point. You make every time and And do the legwork basically, right? So if you if you Don't have support from there it's getting its really difficult and and you're just defending Basically all the time instead of being active. The second thing Is If the same happens with your peers so the development team maybe that you working would or a data team that you're working with.

[00:13:14] If the same happens there and your always having to go into this defensive mode, then thats probably the second factor why you would just go back an analyze all of time. And I think the third thing is really if you don't have access to the site itself to make changes Then Your Time Is Limited To The Things You Can Really Do And changing things on the side isn´t option for you. You Have Go Back To Drawing Board Everytime And Work On Strategy. Okay, totally got it. What were the other success factors? So first success factor noted making changes on the website. I feel like It's a nice nugget. so what are The Other Success Factors? was Like The Second Biggest Success Factor Difficult word for sure! What held A lot Was That We Had Bottom-Up Decision Making.

[00:14:10] So It Was A Culture Where There was never some high management person coming in and saying, oh this is what you do now. And then everyone just acts on it. like the culture in booking was if You have an idea doesn't matter which level use that It does not matter What's your pay grade or whatever? If you're an idea and you Have some data behind to prove it Then yes definitely we got a. prioritize it and work through it and test right. So let's I think just culture wise extremely important and what comes with it Is that it's very okay to fail. So you're running, like in my time at booking. I was there

for around six years... In my leaving email i calculated the amount of experiments we ran. and what about a thousand experiments?

[00:14:57] My name was tagged on back then A bit less but around a thousand. And so.. ..in these thousands of experiments ...a large number didn't work out It simply It was. it was hugely discussed online or linked in and everywhere. And then we tested that, and I didn't have any impact. So i remember one of the examples. there was... We went to a conference, I think Munich SMX? I don't know, twenty nineteen or something! And I remember Google just announcing this rel="next"/rel="prev" parameter. basically never attributed the authority to the first page or something. I think that was the whole case back then, everyone believed if you have a product landing pages with many products on it... If you have multiple of them and you paginate them.. That attributes all their authority in the series.

[00:15:56] And we tested this and then basically showed all our hotels to Google. We're hoping for the uplift on this core page, but it never happened! It was just so interesting how a few weeks later when sitting at this conference or reading online that Google said oh yeah... ...we found this mistake actually never attributed them like. well that explains why didn't work out. So being okay with things breaking of failing That. that's really important to the culture. I think because if you can't SEO is You like often, you have an idea of something but you can perfectly say upfront This is gonna be the exact impact it will have and its one hundred percent going to be correct. Let's us let's just not how as your works?

[00:16:41] We can do a little bit more in paid marketing i think But there are different type of channel. so So i think The willingness To accept the failure was Important. i remember having An interview with someone that wanted to work at booking and we said look what happens if you fail, like something doesn't go as planned. If one of your experiments does not work out? And the response was something around? well I will probably see who can apologize too. No no completely different! You should be basically proud about this learning now because it strikes on things off-your-to do list. But every SEO out there, every head-off. Every core SEO manager probably has a list of things right now that they want to have implemented on the website.

[00:17:31] and if we could just... Every second of them say this didn't work. This doesn't work. The list would be so much smaller Now And it will focus more in few things They believe can still work. So having something not workout is actually very good for you To move one find thing That does work. So you need that cycle of being able to test things on the site, putting it out there and see if it works. The problem is sometimes your working weeks-and-weeks in a feature. You roll it out And then doesn't work? You immediately think well I should probably... Tested bit longer or maybe its still gonna go positive but It's really hard to accept something didn't worked. That put so much time right? Would say at this point because I think experimentation.

[00:18:22] even before we started to talk, i knew that Booking.com also had a strong experimentation culture around conversion rate optimization. They have in some way been the OGs of enterprise conversion rate optimisation. but would you say every company with an organic growth motion should have some sort of experiment library and documented outcomes for experiments. And if yes, what would you say? How should an experiment be documented? so because I can imagine that people now ask themselves okay So today then document every single content piece. For example i put on my blog to say this type of content worked. well This didn't work. Well this topic It would be very valuable for others to understand your thinking on it.

[00:19:37] or read online. I know that Lukas Vermeer, one of the experiment leads back then at booking. he wrote a piece on line which has like a calculator where you can just type in your numbers and then expect an effect and it outputs what if this result is significant or not basically or statistic is insignificant. so there's few things math and statistics, but then on the pure thinking behind it whenever I

test something or wherever we rolled something out to decide. And notice that many SEOs there try to do in as much isolation as possible in order not to break anything. so let's say i want to change my breadcrumbs structure of some thin. yeah when they changed at a new level into your son and lets see i may clothing shop with samzara or something and not affiliate with them or work with them.

[00:20:38] But let's say I'm Zara, And then i want to add a new category A New level of categories. so Let's Say they have Shoes Or and and and I don't know t-shirts on their side? I Know They Want To Add A New Level Which Is Men's T-Shirt men's shoes Women's T Shirts Woman's Shoes and so On. So let's Say That is that is Their Goal to do that. Often SEOs would probably test it in like only one market for a small as possible because they're scared of hurting other parts. And booking the thinking was exactly opposite. We want to have results as quick and fast, so we are exposing our experiment with large amounts of people And if the feedback turns positive, we're keeping it after a certain time is negative. We are turning off again but we got faster to our learning and so that's something where... If you have large hypothesis of change on your side test as much traffic as possible to get signal back.

[00:21:46] A single block article or single topic will probably not be worth to experiment. And you should also probably find out if it's in general worth to experiment, right? There is this thinking of When the when a website as the product Then that probably makes sense to experiment. If its large enough like any online shop or any Marketplace or something write up That's where I feel home a lot because of my My work experience. basically Those need entirely different Yeah SEO measures. then let's say you are a local dentist. So that is how I would think about experimentation, but honestly first get into being able to make changes on your website. then i think it was the bigger problem. before you're solving experimentation probably gets to point where there can be constant stream of change.

[00:22:47] What would you say? those were two. so those noted success factor number to is bottom-up innovation, experimentation allowing people to do a lot of changes. So first one is you have to make changes. the second is how I would frame it actually enable the team To Make These Changes and to Have A Culture Of That Being Done Frequently And Also Well Documented. so Is There Another Success Factor that You Will Say Something That Also Guides Your Decisions Guides How You Think About Making organic growth successful nowadays. There is, I mean there's a whole set of values that we followed. things like customer first was the big value for booking. um... There were a bunch of these. basically you saw everywhere in company.

[00:23:42] people would print them out and put on boards. The doors between the different offices would have the values printed on the door. So you basically saw them everywhere, they will be repeated in presentations and that created this culture of people keeping each other in check. so one of then it'll do their right thing. whenever we optimized the website We got into these edge cases where if I was like hmmm If i did this It could be a bit grey And some user might misinterpreted but it makes much more sales or something, doing the right thing prevented you from implementing these things. The teams held each other accountable for this! This was great and same in experimentation culture. so every experiment on a website would be peer reviewed at some point.

[00:24:35] You'd run your experiment put life then document what you've done there. Quarterly or half-year reviews of the product managers in the company was that they needed to say, That they have reviewed a certain amount of experiments from other people and the company. And no one ever really saw it at least on my experience. we never saw as like an internal police or something where People are trying point out things for you. The culture is so open. every time some other Product manager I respected highly would review one of my experiments and find something in it that didn't go as planned or they could have been done better. It was an insane learning for me.". And so we just completely accepted it, you work with a bunch of smart people who were very okay with criticism and feedback...

...and I made the work way better.

[00:25:33] So values are really helped. fear from management or something that I have to deliver, and it has to be right. That changes your decision-making! So sometimes when i'm speaking with companies but... ...I hope these cultures are changing a bit. so then its okay basically to make mistakes And get it right in the next experiment perfectly. Perfect transition. that was not scripted. Now, obviously your role has changed and you have the opportunity to look into a whole portfolio of companies. What would say what were most important to you on how that has changed. How do think about SEO, organic growth moving from one company and being focused completely on one company obviously successful company now having the opportunity maybe also the challenge look into a wide variety of companies?

[00:26:48] One other reasons for me to move from booking private equity back then was I've been in travel for a long time until that point. So, initially at the start-up scene in Berlin... ...I worked while on Wimdu which was under Rocket Internet and basically very similar to Airbnb let's say That And we were basically optimized for holiday apartment terms. so i have been an SEO in travel then moved to booking and continued there. What interests me a lot was just to broaden my view and see what other business models are out there that I haven't really looked at yet. I found the two companies on my own before, these were vastly different companies one with subscription one in e-commerce. so it showed already they're different things out there.

[00:27:40] And moving to PE That's where big thing i immediately saw extremely interesting. Permira is split into four sectors. We have healthcare with services, consumer and tech. And in the tech sector for example you have a company like Zendesk. They are not at travel marketplace. So now how do they do SEO? What's it that they're looking to get traffic? The big learning I really had was first of all very interesting How different the SEO scene is. Things that work for a marketplace on online shop don't work. For A website, That is mostly trying to find long tail Longtail content strategies or did they try? To find customers that way? and And I think like if i look back now remember speaking At the conference at some point then I was pitching this idea of product led SEO.

[00:28:39] what's with? a few years Back? and The idea Was basically when you have a database would With items in it for booking. It would be something like an amount of cities and then a month of regions, Then you can basically just scale landing pages based on that. so hotel in city becomes hotel in Berlin Hotel London Hotel Paris and so on times two hundred thirty thousand cities And I do the same thing four six hundred regions and they did The same thing for two other countries and so-and-so right? So he created this huge corpus Basically but we could only do if there is enough Enrichment data and your other databases. so the actual hotels that are available in these places right? These pages need to be filled with something.

[00:29:18] And if you now have some like hotels in tiny village wherever You're from then there might just been no hotels available, and so therefore the landing pages has an all-right to exist and So I was pitching this idea at his conference, and it was just. i Was trying To understand why doesn't everyone do This Like. It's so clear to me That every company must Have something that lets them scale it. And then I saw all these different models as a business model and spoke to two people, okay yeah see like very different SEO. totally understand why certain people on LinkedIn are pitching ideas in the way because really matches specific audience. The time at booking was always small. you have people going deep.

[00:30:06] how write this one perfect article? And that was never a thing for booking, like we don't need one perfect article. We need hundred thousand good optimized landing pages That will bring one click each. That's a hundred thousand clicks versus what is your article gonna make right? So very different types of type types of strategies. um so yeah I think the big learning for me too to just not all SEO

strategies work For everyone and you Just need To figure out What are The things that Work for You. hmm And what would you say? if we look at obviously, You don't have to name any particular company. But If you looked the companies that you actively work with The companies that cross your deck That eventually Premiere might not engage With further the companies from your network What do those companies have in common?

[00:31:03] If they had a solid organic growth motion? And how much of that comes back to the three success factors we have just laid out from booking.com? and how much are like other factors, maybe specific business models or certain verticals? I think it's good at this moment when you re-summarize and distill the kind of booking factor into into three factors. It's the management that needs to support you, it's the peers that need to trust you and it needs you to have access to this site. Its these things. if you do them in place You're gonna be successful with SEO. If one of them fail then work on it and fix it. The worst thing I can see is laundry lists. It's what we have submitted it to the development team, but they're not doing anything for us.

[00:32:09] It's this one story that comes over and doesn't matter which company were looking at does a matter with Which SEO I'm talking too at conferences And on the phone and so on its always coming down to well. IT Doesn't implement all my things? That is the one moment where i am thinking Well just delete everything from that list today. delete your strategy. even think about what is the one thing that if you implement it today will have The most chance of impacting decide positively. What does that? One thing because it seems like You can't even get one thing implemented right now, but at he seems to be completely overwhelmed with everything you wrote which Is not entirely IT's fold. let's be honest there's often the stories itself are complex.

[00:32:58] they're often over Over documented I guess or under-documented. Often it's XY problems, where you have instead of just fixing the right thing. You want them to fix something else because we believe that they can't fix that. So let me put an example behind this. Let say I'm in online shop and I've filters on my left side of navigation And all these filters are leading to search pages or parameterized pages and I as a SEO want those two be linked to landing pages. So now I'm saying, well IT will anyways not do it. My story is going to be please put landing pages links on the bottom of the page below the results. That's something that i see every day and... ...I bet that the IT team would fix the right thing for you if they get their complete context And the write-story behind If someone looking into how complex this actually is And I think a great help here is Claude, by the way.

[00:34:06] Like if you give any type or any AI that you trust basically but If You Give Them Good Enough Context They Are Insanely good in answering all these questions. so if you gives an AI The context of how your Navigation Is Built Right Now and you tell it what you're trying to achieve It's Pretty Good In Figuring Out Like what are the edge cases and where everything's breaking? And it's pretty good in reasoning. So I think if you go with your development team, try to just analyze these things work together at an AI or something and figure out What is actually a thing. It's probably afternoon. You have most of those things figured-out. If that number one biggest story you'll get implemented I think it's good to, over the summer.

[00:35:02] now just after your vacation come back to work. Think through all of things that are currently floating around in an organization. Just take them away from. everyone say we're resetting. Now i adjusted my strategy. Here is one two three thing that really need That make a impact for us and they not. these like sub stories We only do because can't change. main thing How do you balance? because it's so? this is also a question that I personally often ask myself how to your balance. Long term thinking like okay, i have the vision for business or website that is longer than week of month six months twelve months and let us say this mission makes sense like its vision that is legitimate in its Long-term span.

[00:35:59] Now, how do you balance this longer view with exactly the thinking? what can I Do basically today or this week? What can we get shipped now? that has an impact like a feel Like going from A small initiative to a big goal and going for my big gold was one initiative is probably One of the most complex things in planning And so How do you think about that? yeah So I think, so it all starts with business cases really. But if you SEO compounds over time right? Things that are there today If you get implemented one year earlier then some other thing would similar but slightly larger growth potential. The early you implement this. other things probably already compounded much more growth overtime or much more traffic.

[00:36:56] So I think that's the one thing to keep in mind when you implement things. You probably need, and it is what people already do on their laundry lists right? They are really checking how much effort is required And how much potential there. If your trying... Like i'm a big fan of not finding short term patched solutions and actually working towards The great goal or a Big Fan Of That Because Im Not A Big Fan deleting things you've done previously, but in an environment where now it's not so complex anymore for some code to be written. Maybe the environment like that is very okay. just implement some shorter term thing and then later on delete or override with whatever real thing if wanted probably couldn't get.

[00:37:51] it also depends a bit of your engagement. Many of the people have Probably some kind of timer in mind like I'm staying for another year or well No, this is gonna be my last my last stop. I'm going to stay here until and till i retire And that Decides a little bit over what you actually want? To do if your an agency That only has one or three months engagement with a company? Well You probably wanna push The things that Have impact immediately and balance them A Little Bit With Longer Term Things so that they're still compounding if you keep that engagement running. But yeah, I think it's... You've got of course gotta balance a little bit but comes down to just business case and then draw over time right?

[00:38:40] We already talked about the people So we talked for example That need support from management, trust your peers. Let because i know u also care about topic alot. let dive deeper into this like people aspect. Um, and I'm starting this with a very broad supposedly broad question. From your point of view what makes the great SEO person? What makes it great as CEO person? Hmm... What are-what are the traits? What are the characteristics? Right! Yeah how does a great seo person How do you? let's let's reframe It how do you identify A great SEO Person? yeah Exactly, so that's what I wanted to get through. I think answering this question of... What makes an SEO person a great SEO person is probably something we're all trying to answer when we are hiring right?

[00:39:39] In the moment where with another SEO they were trying to hire for in a room and testing them That's one way try to figure out if their grade or not. So maybe i can just walk you abit thru. Well, I hope no one games that but a bit through the framework and how interview people. And it's... It is of left over from time at booking. really The three things i'm looking at business acumen If you understand how the website makes money How much impact your channel has? So Business Acumen being first communication. as second thing Are you capable of communicating with C-level? Are you able to communicate with juniors, are you capable... ...of giving clear answers. If I ask about your three priorities or something.. ..are you able explain them in a way that I understand it?

[00:40:40] and also someone who is not an SEO. So communication is important. That's actually what i have been working on for quite some time now. sometimes need to overcommunicate a bit in the company, In order to be seen. That is I think... We often do things and we're just done with it And then don't close the loop anymore. So saying after you've done something Hey by the way i have this now Is I think good tip. So communication's second one The last part really craft. This is hardcore SEO skill For each of these Have set up questions and scenarios that Im trying walk through. When it comes to craft

depending on the website, if its a marketplace or something I will ask you technical questions for market place.

[00:41:26] If we're talking about is content heavy web site? The question would be different for the craft part and maybe go more into content creation. The communication split, I'm just testing on. I am asking them for example how like tell me about a project you run in the past and how you measured it? So that's often... You understand are they able to just frame this project you never heard of before? Are there able to frame it to you And then tell you This is two or three things i looked at. For business acumen It's really Often an analysis part. I'm trying to see if They prioritize SEO over everything else In the company Because it's their baby or if they understand, well there are other channels that also have to push and therefore you can only get eighty percent of what you actually wanted.

[00:42:16] So those are basically the three things business acumen communication craft. And then there are a few Yeah just kind of trades I'm looking out for. like. A good SEO is someone who builds and implements instead of opines right? Someone that does things not just sits in meetings and has an opinion on things. So someone that can drive, I think is a good SEO person. Someone who understands the website well enough to make business case. so how do you fit in as channel? Once your land new company are able request right data Are they able to communicate? In interviews, it's always a weird situation because people are usually a bit nervous. And so you can test the two well if they're talking well at sea level but sometimes see how more comfortable or less comfortable with that.

[00:43:20] So I think something like this is possible. and then maybe something that ties into what we just talked about... ...I want them to be able work on their main things not tiny details. If someone comes in and says, well like I checked your website. And as saw on the lighthouse report Your page speed is currently at fifty-five and i think it should be at sixty Because if we fix this one tiny thing that noone cares about On all of you sub pages then that score goes up by five points? I don't want to hear that really! Do You understand The demand That Is out there for the Website ? Do You Understand the Space We're In ? Do u Understand Who's the Competition? Are you able to build me a graph that shows relative market share over time versus these others?

[00:44:07] And are we moving up or down inside of that space. That is what I'm looking for. and whatever the real stories are in the end, then there's something will come out your analysis work once you landed on company but i think thats thinking that really need. And lastly good SEO. someone has their own project running. sorry! But that is something...I feel like it changed. I mean, i'm not like an first-generation old SEO dinosaur. Right? Like...I started maybe second or third generation if we can say that there's the people who did SEO in the nineties and then people that did SEO on their early two thousands. to put this a bit into perspective.. ..i started SEO just before the first Panda & Penguin updates came out.

[00:44:53] so two thousand eight nine or so. So thats when i start it. And at that time I feel like everyone around me had SEO projects. Everyone has WordPress websites, blogs, satellite blocks tiny shops personal website something that they maintained and learned from. because yes LinkedIn existed but there wasn't much sharing going on back then. Sharing happened in different channels often Facebook actually. That's where information sharing happens a lot in the SEO scene In Facebook groups. And yeah, I just feel like you need your own project because if you don't get this input from external You need Just changing something on your own side for a bit and seeing the real impact that has or even more important The impact it does not have.

[00:45:45] Informs is so much for For the project. That you were employed at right? Like sometimes there are these things everyone i believe as this thing in mind Right now whether they're like oh wish I could Test this one thing. I wish i could just fix all our hreflang and then i bet it's like, This must be the

thing right? And so if you have a personal project break your hrefling. The impact is probably like unless it's a severe technical issue and something really majorly broken, holds your website back. It's probably not going to be the number one thing that there are. other stuff has more impact than then. I think personal projects are great way. just figure this out. And would you say at point for example That mentioned between lines This has changed.

[00:46:46] and this referring to people having projects would you say that it's like the absolute number of people having project has actually decreased? or what do you say? its more than. More people have just entered in space so they're relative. share off people having products has decrease but is due too, just did the topic of SEO becoming mainstream where In the early days, even first second generation it was just let's say very tacky and a little bit nerdy et cetera topic. right now you have also people coming from content. And coming from like other areas somehow entering the SEO space. so yeah how do you think about that? Yeah good thinking. well maybe I'm thinking in old clusters here. actually I do still think there is benefit of this, having your own projects running because it doesn't matter which direction you're coming from if its content or tech SEO.

[00:47:46] Or some other type of discipline in SEO that would probably be valuable for you to see the impact and change on things like. you need your own playground. but um... It could very well just be industry itself. grew I mean it hundred percent did right like in the beginning. It felt like you knew every seo when he went to a conference Like, just look through room and do like okay? Well probably i've seen like fifty percent of people maybe haven't spoken To them before but i know them from The socials or so. And i think yeah Maybe that industry Just grew me and then maybe its also the the. Yeah, maybe it's just an industry at crew and You speak into different People over time and therefore may be everyone has projects and i don't Know about That could Be too.

[00:48:29] i guess you have A pretty good view actually into the industries was just where I felt like if you look at a core of people that are very strong and then basically lower the barrier for more people to entry, so my thinking is you will inevitably have some sort quality dilution. So maybe let me look in this from another aspect with other question which If you, if you think about talking to a hundred people now and then taking the sort of like recruiting framework. You just out outlined what would you say? how many people actually pass? The bar that you apply I guess it One out of one hundred is at ten out of a hundred. is this isn't fifty out Of a hundred? i guess It's not fifty. but How Many People Actually Bring These Traits That you for example look for in your framework.

[00:49:32] Yeah, well I can't give you two good insights into the entire HR funnel because i'm not on first stage. often like um we there's professionals professional HR professionals basically that do their first screening. how it works is usually an SEO manager or head of SEO or a CMO whoever hiring position kind writing down Like a document which outlines what they're looking for, What kind of characteristics. And with the companies that I'm working With i'm able to already influence That. so am able To speak to the CMO For example and say look like these are The things that i would like the HR person to just screen A little bit on. later On we will test it a Bit harder. one Of the thing is if you hiring an SEO Person for marketplace So let's say were hiring for mobile you probably want an SEO that already has some kind of marketplace experience or large-scale SEO experience versus someone like it depends really on the role, right?

[00:50:39] Versus somebody who maybe knows a good local SEO. They're just different... Both are great SEOs in their fields but its very hard to apply one role for another. Let's switch to another topic One. I was thinking about another aspect, but I think you already gave a pretty well outline of it. Something that i'm also exposed to from our work experience here at the agency is Does SEO have to play an important role in a marketing mix for every company? Or are there certain factors like market

environments, verticals where SEO definitely has to be a growth driver and other cases where SEO is optional or maybe even irrelevant. So how do you think about that? right I Think Like an easy test to do is, and that's the booking.com example An easy test.

[00:51:59] if you run paid advertisement inside of Google or something And get huge responses on keyword universe meaning there a lot traffic coming in from this Then probably have really good case for SEO To also rank these terms. Is SEO important for your company? Well, if paid marketing is important to you then SEO's probably important too. That works really well I think everything that has these large scale websites with short hat keywords so hotels and acts and what not... ...I Think it becomes harder For every website. It has to work content heavy on like this long tail type of queries. thats probably where its becoming a bit more difficult To justify. For those, you still need to understand this initial keyword universe I think.

[00:52:58] Understand that keyword thinking is a bit of old-thinking but if you're crunching it in the right way You at least get an understanding off whether or not. So let me just walk through what we are doing here. Usually when looking into space We've seen the website that we are interested in, and now try to understand what other competitors. So just looking at this one-website's keywords... ...we use data for SEO for example to pull all of their key words or Sistrix or Semrush similar web whatever tool you want to use here.. ..we're pulling out of there keyword And then check who is in top ten ranking positions in the map packs and advertisements The keywords that this website is ranking for. And so then we take all the websites, We filter out who are the largest real competitors like Who isn't YouTube?

[00:53:54] Who Isn't Facebook if you will? You find other real competitors and Then were doing the same exercise for those websites. again Were finding All of their keywords Again. So That builds in an enormously large universe. This Is millions Of Keywords Usually That You Can Play With. Now You Try To Understand how much of that share is each of the companies having in this demand universe. And so often you will see there's either one competitor or more content heavy website, just have a lot more shares than others. and now we're looking into these company profile to try understand what are their keywords? Is it something interesting for me? I mean, of course don't look at it as a keyword level. What i usually do is take all the keywords and push them through an AI through ChatGPT's API Usually And let model decide on Which bucket does that key word fit in?

[00:54:59] Right so im feeding few hundred Keywords then giving template That has to squish these keywords into. So its just a brand Keyword. this is a Brand navigational Keyword non-brand whatever key, or anything. Whatever your space is and you can get really detailed with these buckets And then once you have this all bucket that you can see. where in these buckets are you versus your competition? if there's one of These buckets that is labeled as high commercial intent That Is what You're Looking for and you See In The Bucket Your Competition Is Much Larger Than You Are. Then SEO Was Probably Something You Should Look Into Because Here You Have Space Which Is Commercial and you have competition already ranking, which means that your probably behind.

[00:55:46] so focus on SEO. And it's a very simple way. use Claude or something right? Use Claude to let you build all the connectors and then use Python to crunch all of this stuff. Then in pretty short time with little money like I guess in tokens and in credits you're at under two hundred dollars here. You get these entire analysis done. To get from universe is worth for me to optimize within this universe yes-or no? I have another aspect about AI search. A final one, i want to get your view on because...i forgot who gave me this thought but it was basically the idea that big marketplaces or like a big platforms has sort of captured a lot of customer access for businesses. So Google, for example has... ...a huge market share around customer access when it comes to information and then also passing on other websites but Amazon basically gaits customer access in commerce.

[00:56:55] Then Booking.com is the same obviously with other competitors for booking hotels, obviously also other things. But I think hotels and like apartments is probably a big category there and so on and so one. And they're all these different platforms that are very important For certain verticals if you are small medium business That wants to be present. Now the hypothesis was The new AI interfaces Like ChatGPT or Claude can Be Super customer access gate like basically people Abandoning using all the different apps. Like okay, I use Booking.com if i want to book a hotel. i used google If i want To look for some sort of information? I Use amazon if i Want to buy something but i use chachapity For everything.

[00:57:50] Basically this likes super app vision. do you think that there is A realistic chance Of That being the reality in let's say, the next three to five years. I think it comes a bit back to this point of changing customer behavior as difficult. So if you want to see changed customer behavior You need to look into earlier generations right now that are growing up with it or That are yeah, they're growing upward and very close to the tech. so Early twenties late teens i think is probably highest adoption at the moment and replacing a lot of behavior that is normal to us, they just use it differently. When it comes in general to this kind of Gen A-I risk and AI taking over all of that I shaped the opinion about in about twenty twenty two or so that GenAI risk is ultimately Google risk.

[00:58:51] Google has All It Needs About You To Do What ChatGPT and Claude, and Perplexity. They can do it so much better than they can right? To have all the data about you that your history to have AI since a decade like they call themselves AI first in I think twenty seventeen or something. So then they had that ever smart model. They have distribution with them integration on all of these apps multiple apps, what is it like? nine apps or so that are maybe even more than having over a billion users? Like they have all of what it needs to do this. So if you're worried about ChatGPT or Claude taking us away from you I don't know Google. we should be more worried about Google. They have more information about you there much tighter integrated into your workspace.

[00:59:45] i mean We're working in google docs all the time. That's where people actually experience AI I like. maybe it happens that ChatGPT becomes the super app. i think china has a train. china has uh... has a super app where you would book your car and order your food in. And purchase any products online at what. they will all go through the same up into your messaging and such, um..i think we had the same fear many years ago with face book. remember that when was said well once facebook is launching getting actually really big then what's gonna happen is that they have all these real users on the side, already locked in. And now you collect all this data about them over years and years. so Facebook was probably going to be a platform where people do their shopping or booking also...and it never happened!

[01:00:43] In fact some countries are abandoning a bit Still, Facebook is growing still because there's so much of the world that hasn't really registered yet I guess. But these fears have been there before. These fears are being there before. it's a same with online shopping and mobile. first. Remember how Google pushed at so hard in twenty seventeen? That they wanted to get everyone too mobile-first. The fear there was that well, they're so much more space on a desktop computer. So the conversion rates will just drop dramatically. or mobile. and the reality is if you optimize world for mobile to have people that are used to mobile. They would start shopping on mobile And it's not anymore That they doing all their research on a phone and then they go through the desktop computer and finish the booking.

[01:01:27] because I spent money that changed. People spend a lot of money using them over phones now but it took so long like It's something in twenty-twenty seven. All of the world has entirely changed and everyone is using ChatGPT in order to do everything on the internet. If it happens, it will happen so slow that takes such a long time... ...and you'll see some leading indicators or markets moving faster

than others. And when this happens then you should probably react. For us at PE it's always different because we're investing into our company We're holding these companies for significant periods of time. So I think anywhere between maybe six to ten years or so depending on the company and then The next person basically are the next fund that wants to invest does their due diligence?

[01:02:17] For their next six to Ten Years right, so we already have two look a bit into like what's happening in the next ten fifteen twenty years Like one of his larger trends. So for us, it's a little bit different I guess but For any operator right now that needs to move Things like as super app or something could happen. But if it happens. It doesn't happen from one day to another i believe. Okay sounds Like A very Nuance. Take Now i have a final question because we're already an hour and Something in And always ask That Question To Just Ensure that I extracted like as much a great knowledge from my guests. As possible, and I bluntly stole it from Lenny's podcast um From the US. And the question is what didn't we talk about?

[01:03:08] That We should have talked About? i think we covered A huge amount of good topics. Um maybe there just one thing i want to. i wanna i want them people actually know and do. Is That's what I said earlier. Just stop what you do right now go back to a drawing board like leave Like delete your million topics in the in the backlogs and just um Rethink, but really matters the most for your business. And then ask yourself What is one thing? You should put life. Um i think that's uh The big one. the one thing we haven't really talked about this Is that I believe complexity. So everyone thinks as he owes his big black box and it super complex. I think we make it complex by ourself very often. The solutions are often straightforward, you see this right now.

[01:04:02] if your asking a development team that has full access to Claude and then have an SEO team with lots of experience in the topic plus Claude That development teams will ask something You give them a complex answer And they already done their work. so just go with less context and Claude will give them an easier solution often. I think it could be so much easier if we just communicate the one thing over-and-over again that you really want, then work together with people in product, intact data management to shape focus on growth not getting lost our tiny details complex stories really hard to communicate, little schema markup things that we have in mind. They are all important but find like your lane and then push as much you can for one thing.

[01:05:04] That's what will probably deliver the biggest growth of websites. Love it Julian. you shared so much great stuff. I feel this would've been enough for two or three episodes. So thanks a lot for making time busy days. I think for everybody that is still listening here, you should definitely re-listen into certain parts because sometimes things sound so easy but to really like take it in and understand it too. the actual core... It might need a second listen! So i can highly recommend. If people want to learn more about your thinking, etc. Is there a platform? Like is it LinkedIn or another hidden blog where you share daily observations? what can we put into the description? Sometimes when I figure something out before others, I put it on my personal website.

[01:06:12] But i'm really not maintaining it. Okay and just leave there in silence. more like a note for myself. um...I think A good place would be linkedin. that's where sometimes im sharing. but honestly..i feel like I took so much knowledge from other over the years. Like theres so many great SEOs out there that are constantly sharing Um..i Feel like i should maybe give back of it or also start sharing the things that I see. But yeah, it's just a means work rate. so maybe at that point thanks to everyone who is sharing all time It really helps industry To move forward and it really helps Everyone too shape their opinions. So cool. And people if you ever want to apply for working with Julian in whatever capacity For company where he's advising or something Always have your personal project ready to put into the CV or whatever form where you can apply, because it will probably give you a head start.

[01:07:16] Because I know that Julian values people having personal SEO projects. so this is free tip for me here too. close things off! And we're always looking for great people. So reach out if you think your good at something. We need these specialists and people who are really good. Julian, thanks so much for making the time and looking forward to maybe doing an update episode at some point down the road because I know there's always a lot happening on your end. Maybe it will be interesting to revisit few things in one year or two. Let us not wait until ChatGPT becomes a super app!