SEO is not a marketing job anymore | Felix Welckenbach, HomeToGo

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Show notes

My guest today is Felix Welckenbach, Director of Product for Search and Discovery at HomeToGo, a marketplace where millions of travelers book their next dream vacation rental.

In this episode we'll talk about how SEO is not a marketing function anymore at HomeToGo but a product capability, what this actually means like in the day to day, which companies should also think about making a similar change and why shouldn't just measure your AI visibility but put more emphasis on the sentiment.

Let's connect! Niklas on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/niklas-buschner/ Radyant on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/radyant/ Felix on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/welckenbach/ HomeToGo on LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/company/hometogo/ HomeToGo Careers: https://www.hometogo.com/careers/

Full conversation

[00:00:00] JGBT has recently made the move to integrate more and more apps into the product. For example, booking.com. is this also something that you could see happening for home-to-go? I actually looked at a demo two days ago on an MCP Home To Go Alpha product if you will. That brings our inventory and search experience onto platforms. Would you agree that the current time is one of the most exciting times since SEO has become a thing? SEO has always evolved and always changed, but it never changes that much. I feel like this is the biggest fundamental change to what probably our society in total. What didn't we talk about? that We should have talked About. maybe very specific But One Thing That Before we dive In You're Listening To The Masters Of Search Podcast With Me Your Host Niklas Buschner.

[00:00:53] Each week I sit down with some of the smartest people around the world in SEO and AI search to bring you their strategies, mental models and top pieces of actionable advice. If you enjoy this podcast don't forget like subscribe follow it on your favorite podcasting app or YouTube helps us get top-notch guests create best possible content for you! Let's dive into todays episode. My guest today is Felix Welkenbach, Director of Product for Search and Discovery at Home to Go. A marketplace where millions of travelers book their next dream vacation rental! In this episode, we'll talk about how SEO is not a marketing function anymore at home to go but a product capability. What that actually means in the day-to-day which companies should also think of making similar changes and why you shouldn't just measure your AI visibility.

[00:01:46] put more emphasis on sentiment. I'm very much looking forward to digging deeper into all

those. so welcome to the podcast Felix! Thanks for having me so cool that you agreed to come on and thanks to Malte also For tagging. You publicly under my post where asked four new guests. So there was a lot of pressure for you two actually agree to do this. Yeah, your father the comments man convince me. I've been asking times and thanks malta for making them match The things my tomatoes great. um you recently moved from Your old title which was director organic growth to direct our product search and discovery And I'd like to know what this is about. So maybe for context at home-to-go being very early on back then my colleague Dominic Schwartz are you who?

[00:02:33] You might know Set up. What we called inbound marketing at Home-To-Go, which was always a combination of SEO when PR and those teams were very closely together To buildup lending its learning pages. ultimately learning, experience and help form well in search on the onsite part. And then a PR team and strategy around building authority to data-led storytelling. that led you coverage in media over the years. That model has been proven pretty successful I think. Fast-forwarding. now to the era of AI search, maybe it's a model that we started quite early which many companies are pivoted into. I'll come back later and then... ...I took that over in that role pivoted intro growth world where it still included anything organic traffic acquisitions from SEO to PR but also social media And asked home to go as company grew.

[00:03:36] We've done many acquisitions over the past. Yes, we started out in when I joined as a scale up still. We are now public company with big B to D part and as part of the marketing the marketplace side an organization. um we realized that there's A lot more scope on the SEO and product site. And so while we've always the story given quite product led we intensified That ultimately To refocus on SEO. So that's my previous role of director organic growth and That means that we've always treated SEO as a product even in the previous setup But now with a lot more focus for the dedicated engineering team, We had a common OKRs And gold set that they teams work towards too. this king broke maps that we shipped ultimately.

[00:04:33] what we then realized, and why we made that ultimate switch at the end of last year to search and discovery is there was a lot of inefficiencies happening internally. So while were having dedicated engineering team working on SEO learning pages they have a lot shared components with actual search experience. it felt like it was distinct. in rebuilding something had big overlap. Hmm, let's reorganize that. And lets combine our efforts. and on top of that we also saw the search landscape is somewhat changing. Our landing page historically by very broad destination focused had a lot in depth content. We saw this sub has become more transactional over time so it also warranted to change internally how we organize for that in an environment where there's less and less traffic, going to the open web.

[00:05:40] And I think we get that later as well. We also notice lower click-through rates on Google Search over time and hence more focus on conversion. So we also said all of the conversion benefits are working on... In this example call it actual products or the actual search and browsing experience users have is something that we also want to make sure that SEO benefits from and cut down on the inefficiencies. Yeah, as a result made that change. it's in very interesting new view super excited too. now be responsible for all of that. On top of that onsite discovery part which now spans across anything inclusive still of SEO learning pages, the actual search and browsing experience to their property details.

[00:06:33] Pages all the way leading up through the checkout. it also does include the offside visibility in discovery part which is inclusive of. yeah I mentioned as your landing pages was also LLM Search AI search. what would you say? What is the biggest change connected to that transition? from your perspective personally also, because I think it's very interesting from a leadership perspective. but then

for the organization as whole. It is next to all of the organizational changes that are part of this and the structural change ultimately having wider responsibility. so in context ASSOGRU has already home-degraded marketplace where our team is focused on And we also have a, what do you call home-to-goop pro?

[00:07:22] A B to be armor is softwares. They're services that will provide the industry and as part of that it's complex product with multiple brands. so compared other bigger larger OTAs We have multi brand portfolio strategy which means that underlying technology powering everything pretty much same. yet We have different configurations based on the wide label and brand we are serving. You can think about Home to Google Group as a portfolio approach when it comes to brands, between over ten brands now or thirty markets. so It's quite big complex organization around that our team is looking after. The whole scale just massively changed whereas you're always treated SEO As a product in terms of how we build it and how we collaborate engineering, but still very zoomed-in on the SEO part.

[00:08:23] And then now... It's almost like we entered into a new room where all of sudden you see all the other aspects of product as well, having exposure to different stakeholders with lots of requirements so that definitely needed a change process for transition people also through new roles I think the biggest realization at, as of now to say we are also still transitioning. So this is something we started in the end off last year and one of the biggest differences that I noticed even though it was product-led... We think about solutions quite a lot right? Like we need this implemented like certain technical specifications whereas being responsible for the wider product now which includes all of other channels from brand direct to semen to philia to see and that's ultimately.

[00:09:20] Channeling traffic to the product. all of a sudden it's more about defining customer problems in outcomes. we want to shape an spending time on problem definition until dad was one of the biggest realizations. two shift our minds from this is solution A I wanted implement too, All right, what is the actual problem? How can we frame it? how come you validated. What does a testing strategy look like? so yeah I changed process that was needed and um i think real benefit as well that product managers We had worked in SEO before now also were able to expand their horizon. And I see between thriving at that new environment when everyone Is liking that new challenge. It comes with additional requirements to creating transparency.

[00:10:10] To the stakeholders we are responsible for now and talk right across the marketplace, across the home-to-go pro segment And... The way I led this in my role as lead for team is also give people room for understanding the domain starting out with driving into certain aspects of the product or even sub-product and build in knowledge from the ground up, so almost form the bottom up rather than trying to understand everything at the same time. And we did that change a very interesting time beginning off the year which is our annual goal setting and planning but also our OCR Setting & Goal Planning for Q one. So we were thrown into the deep end. But then my judgment so far with the verdicts across said it's working out really well.

[00:11:06] The team is lacking the change and we're delivering against our goals, slowly adapting to that new environment. Let's go through this shift a little bit. you mentioned already something you saw were inefficiencies might have been a trigger. I want understand it better. um, what you saw and maybe also what your thoughts were. And then also how you like came up with this idea. because if people are listening to this and they feel Like hmm Maybe This is also for us? Maybe not I don't know. i think it's important For People To Understand What To Look For To understand If They Might Also Have To Go Into That Direction. So What We Saw Were A Few Things. I Think It Started With Market Dynamics trust dynamics overall, as in customer behavior.

[00:11:59] What are customers searching for? How often frequently they're searching to be sold? quite

a lot. volatility in terms of search volume or segments that users our keyword segments use where we were searching all the way from pre-COVID through COVID and then years after so this is quite a large has adapted. At the same time, we saw search changes. We're all aware of how this sub has evolved also since then. I think there's a lot more transparency around pricing. so you think about Google Hotel Finder or Vacation Rental Finder and Google's willingness to become the category Search Lending Page. This is where we thought it was an opportunity for example then serve property details pages to Google, which we historically never did before.

[00:12:58] And this is something that in the previous setup was a bit tricky to do because it wasn't necessarily our core competency and the product itself wasn't really set up for all of a sudden To be receiving search traffic right? It was built almost an isolation. Our team was only learning pages that were build specifically for SEO. so As we thought about how to make the product itself, that is serving millions of customers more search-friendly almost. We realized that you also need then organize around it and made sure part what I touched on previously was able to A B test efficiently if we touch let's say an offer card or information about a property which will be shown to users twice because once once we do it in the product, these were the inefficiencies that started noticing.

[00:13:51] And while I'm a big fan of actually having had that ability to drive dedicated robot with an engineering team because they've made us super fast. there weren't almost no dependencies. We're able to ship it and build up a ton visibility over time. that came on top, all of a sudden the approach we had followed wasn't really quite working and the way forward entailed a lot of real product work. Worked in common products to make it more accessible for search engines as we saw demand shifting towards those page types Google incentivizing users via search changes And so... The conclusion was we need to change something and ultimately then decided instead of multiple product teams working on a different end-of the product, combine it all.

[00:14:53] And create one layer responsibility which is that? automatically our team. but its sounds if things are more complicated now like you have two line with more different stakeholders You have to bridge the gap between uh, how to build the best product and how to built the best project in a way that it's also built for discovery. And billed for search. so would you agree? That is like more complicated. now too. ship stuff within new setup. It is More complicated Which in part. thats where the fun is. Thats the challenge we took on. At this same time if You look at the maturity of the SEO product I Would say that we've reached a pretty high maturity rate based on what performance time spent over the years they'd be testing done, and in their new environment now where you have to come into product.

[00:15:53] I think then it is more complex but when there's an opportunity ahead of us its only going to be realized if we work across team look at the product as a whole. I think that's distinction before of having an SEO learning page, it is kind of outlying what we do right? Like normally set up structurally would be... We're having a bunch of offers on our landing page because one is to main intent. if you search for vacation rentals in Florida You want vacation rents from Florida. so we gave users that. but there was company by lot of content per example By different filters or different features of property types. Does it have a hot job, for example? It doesn't have the pool. can I bring my pet? so landing pages were complex.

[00:16:44] nevertheless there was still sort of only windows into what we have an offer and Once you click on that learning page You would be transported to that actual search experience if we had said they will still one step in between. And What we realized is that having that once stepped in-between Is somewhat unnecessary. think we used two have it and we needed because just like a few years back as I mentioned, AIDA product wasn't set up that way. Second these learning page setups and designs in layout worked really well for us And so there was no need to combine them. but you know fast

forward here We are...we had that need and unconvinced at a learning page where the main user intent lands on is actually finding, combining and browsing properties.

[00:17:37] And then ultimately booking one for your holiday must be the same page as Selenic Page, right? It doesn't make sense to combine it any longer if there's no structural technique or whatever reason. So this is just a mission we set out to do to combine where that makes sense... Where drives upside especially in maybe more transactional keyword segments where the real intent, as we know and measure it is exactly that. And we have some early proof as well there. those landing page types now drive additional and hence conversion rate if you will. for like comparison The new landing page type that we are testing which is the core product Is working better than then previous page. Can you walk us through maybe one uh, change or maybe a project that is currently in progress just for people to.

[00:18:35] Maybe understand it little bit better. what are changes now? they're happening? In terms of two the actual product like how-how the progress changing How pages are changing. Uh may be something That came up Now. I know you're still early in The face but already from the new collaboration circles project that we're working on currently is to ultimately combine the landing experience with a core product for some of our brands and some of the keyword segments. And exactly what you mentioned, it did require. all of a sudden I'd be talking about other stakeholders because Mansearch and SEO was one stakeholder but there were many others stakeholders involved. so when first created the vision how they should look like We included everyone that has a stake in it.

[00:19:29] So, It was other product managers and there were parts of the organization The partner and supply team. It was also the demand team on the marketing side And then A large stakeholder if you will Of course also engineering and tech teams. Meaning we needed to understand What complexity is behind Serving your products from common URL serving the product with, ultimately yeah underneath um this same stack and a very concrete aspect for example is filtering. If you know we want certain facets of the product let's say uh a vacation ended with a pool. to come to that as one of the most popular amenities in our industry. if we wanted it to be indexed we needed then something previously not really necessary needed to be available for the user, but now it usually holds to be search engine readable.

[00:20:38] And so I think there's a few decisions and trade-offs that need to be made along the way to ensure are we getting the best of both worlds here? Also some sort of flexibility right... So for example We have a lot of traffic still coming from SEO from SEM. that's a large chunk of our traffic next to Brandt and other channels, is landing on the actual search results page. Users land. then they have the ability to filter set their dates, refine their searches etc. Now this means we also need some certain personalization abilities meaning users from SEM or SEO might need to see different elements on slightly different order. So the ability also personalize and segment that product based on the referrer, base of context in information users' health.

[00:21:36] And so it wasn't a single decision from the SEO team anymore but required other stakeholders involved. One topic still open is how do we approach A, B testing like what do we do about? And how do we transfer our... What are you used to...? We're calling CI testing or causal inference testing. So C, O and B testing. How do we combine that with a now focused on much more CRO-focused A,B testing On the product side. How do bring both together so we can allow and test for whats working well To impact automated rankings and also as a channel of that now. LLM visibility, an AI search disability while at the same time we make sure to be can run AB test which we do run a lot off in parallel In there product every day.

[00:22:35] And so it just requires you two think about yeah other stakeholders. are they stakeholder

requirements? At The Time at the Same Time also an ability to compromise because If you have your solution in mind, this is exactly how it will look like. It's likely not going to work if SEO and search are the main stakeholder but there're many others at the same time. so yeah that may be an example of what process goes on How we approach it And You said That you just started the transition. basically What do you expect? How would you say like having all systems operational if you want to call it that? Yeah, I'd rule. That process will be going on for a little longer. On the team side we've made an initial transition.

[00:23:33] people are ramping up in the domain think they're becoming experts and their stuff product especially that unification project i mentioned probably still take The majority of this year For sure H-One and then leading into probably the third quarter of this year, potentially in fourth quarters as well. And can you share a little bit maybe about what's on the road map now for like new search-and-discovery products? So something that obviously I don't want to spoil any secrets but it is also on the horizon. there are people listening too who are passionate users at home to be brought through the product. Yeah, there's a few themes that we are thinking about in terms of features... I don't like to think it features only more.

[00:24:32] so how can we enhance the customer experience at all? Why do they enter and across all different touchpoints And one of their major goals this year is to drive further repeat and retention. So ensuring that the product experience we're building is also leading to more customers coming back through organic channels, direct through app. We are very focused on pricing and providing excellent prices and discounts any communications around it. Our industry is very price competitive. I mentioned Google is creating a lot of price transparency by allowing users to compare ultimately also in the vacation that you'll find out already very early on. I'm sure LLMs will get there, we've seen the advances in e-commerce especially with the UCP from Google, Czech CPT are their own protocol.

[00:25:31] ultimately too allow price comparison and discovery chopping on LLM's exactly then. not surprisingly AI is a big one. We actually just today released a press release and announcement that we worked on the new version of what we group as Dash, which is our AI companion. It features in the marketplace so it's a jackpot. automatically you can ask questions to about the property or aspects of your booking really able to cut down the amount of agent escalations that previously happened for the bot. So normally, the process was you had a problem and couldn't find the answer. You would call us up or send an email. Now we have that customer service and chatbot for customers in between. They will use it And they'll get answers right away around the property again.

[00:26:32] Cancelation policies look like etc. Our customer service seems to focus a lot more about helping customers that have longer lasting questions. or the question is I needed more research, help them with booking even for example. And we already have variety of features that are live not all off them alive on our channels like Weapon App. but for example we're summarizing reviews and thinking how can we make reviews accessible? Can be grouped by topics And we have summaries of our descriptions, offer descriptions meaning you don't have to read through five paragraphs or text. We can give you a summary off what the property really is about. that's exciting about it and make it a lot more accessible than easier for users to compare right?

[00:27:26] How I think about the product journey is that Right now there are lots of cognitive load on user-to-make decisions Every information and they need to make a call based on that. I think going forward, i like To get A lot more personalized with the recommendations understanding user behavior Based On The signals They leave on the site And then tailoring the product accordingly and Making sure we show Only the most important amenities for That user in time For those searches that they do Not everything. so A lot happening. the personalization and segmentation side as well. We have a lot of

users that come to us and travel with pets for example, so how can we make their choice easier? Their decision making is easier by highlighting properties very pet friendly in an easy approachable way.

[00:28:25] And then there's large buckets of initiatives further around even search Abilities, if you will. So for example enabling more semantic search. even today we experimented with a filter that allows You to put free text search. so If you like your A frame houses classic example or you? Like a certain architectural style of the property that do want to stay in We allowed you to put That into a filter. we would match that against our database offers and inner in a semantic way having understanding of imagery on what images are about. And this is something we also further thinking about, so how can natural language be used to further enhance the experience? To highlight more properties... ...to find properties that you wouldn't have otherwise found and make that journey a bit more exciting and tailored to how you were searching right because in Google we can see it already everyone is forced the product is best operating at, if that makes sense.

[00:29:35] Versus now an AI search. you can put in whatever you like and we see it in a variety of data ways how people prompt and search and speak And ultimately this would also enable more on the home to go marketplace side. And I mean, historically. obviously things are also changing a lot in organic growth. People in SEO and people in search used to think about KPIs like maybe Citrix Visibility Index rankings traffic. now Obviously you'll mention that has shifted way more to critical business results like signups conversions revenue. Now the product world...I'm not a product guy from but from what I know, for example. From smart people is they look at customer satisfaction service like CZ score NPS NRR net revenue retention all of that?

[00:30:33] What a set of KPIs as far you can share did you agree on in the new setup that everybody will work towards? because could imagine this was also something needed little bit of alignment. Yeah, you're right. And then the big benefit we have is that I don't think always operated very performance driven and especially revenue driven. so while visibility is part of our goal set just to have a top line benchmark there's always been quantitative measurement in terms off traffic conversion rates things like revenue per user ultimately revenue. That channel at a whole drove and connected to, you know how are we organizing internally? And like house that shift going. I think this made the shift easier or anything because we are speaking a common language already in the common languages.

[00:31:32] The customer outcome event right like what? What customer outcome do we want to drive there is ultimately beneficial for the business is like, how can we drive bookings? that Drive bookings of users to check out onsite on the marketplace? One of those strategic measures for example. But ultimately the common denominators is bookings and revenue And I think on the market place side. hence why also don't move from SEO if you will into New York has made it a bit easier as that. historically we've been working together across the marketplace sites already, right? Like SEO set sort of at the intersection. But in my mind you can't separate their demand site or marketing side from product side and partner's side because on a market place they're often very intertwined.

[00:32:38] They have lots trade-offs And... ...they need a lot alignment. So that alignment is alot easier. if your common metric speaks to it Then you break down. that metric is a leading indicator for maybe a lagging metric like revenue to go up. And then you can have more specific operational metrics from the partner team, one SEO team for Common Goal and even a Partner Team for CommonGoal. Then we can drive those together. so this how we think about planning. overall it's an adapted OCR framework but that common metric Yeah, rankings visibility do play a role but ultimately we are measured by Outcome customer outcome. that did be changed and you know the output of that is revenue for the business. And so That's also how we measure it.

[00:33:39] if you think about Other companies what would use? say which company should maybe

make a similar move or at least consider making a similar move like home to go. Yeah, it's very good question. I think it depends on your business model automatically and what type of company you are as BTOB or BTOC. this product let set up for example is well suited for marketplace. in my career marketplaces sort the common trade started out in dating and matchmaking, like life entertainment ticketing ultimately travel. And vacation rentals. I see commonalities between the setup there. so i'd say it depends as well on that. what is your ultimate set up? Your goal set? but also what relevance does Search SEO AI search have for your product?

[00:34:49] and then we haven't quite touched on how it interlinks with LLM visibility, but Automatically what? We see in change user behavior. is that More and more of the decision-making process. Yes almost like front loaded through LLMs meaning that free search being done about About products like you're. for example, we have a channel management software in the group called smooth And as a host, you can sign up for Smooboo and then create the property or if you have multiple properties also in there. You can sync calendars across multiple sites such as OTS that you like to list. so it's very helpful product for hosts who want to maximize their exposure not do any manual work on syncing calendars, setting pricing individually.

[00:35:49] And so what we saw there is that's a product where normally it has quite some research involved meaning what players are in the market? What other pros and cons then? we saw that There is A lot of happening in LLMs already and We know because we see generally speaking That traffic more engaged of higher value and better converting. It's definitely fewer traffic or less traffic than maybe Google was sent before, then the share is still small but A it's growing and B we're seeing that that traffic is on fire high quality. so I think the decision is do we as a business want to be working in that presence? ANAI search? And is SEO revenue from Search Engine relevant for us? And how much of that? is then, let's say maybe more marketing driven by a dedicated content learning pages and How Much Of That Is Actually Part Of The Core Product Experience?

[00:36:49] I think these could be Then Diminominators To Decide Should I Organize For That Internally As Well Or Am i Comfortable Having Different Teams. I don't Think It'S A Right Or Wrong Answer. it really depends on Your goals, your models. You're traffic mixed and maybe the anticipated mix that you'd like to have... That really informs them. And if people would start their journey what do they think? What is it that has to get right? Do they need certain people with a certain role or alignment? Do they have to, a couple of first projects on the roadmap? Or what is it that if you say yes I will do it. Felix you convinced me. thanks nice episode. but What is critical for success here? very important question. few things come to mind.

[00:37:50] one is You need leadership alignment in a structure that promotes that meaning If there's a product team and an SEO team that make the decision to work together yet senior leadership or management is not really brought in, it won't work. So A, our team has to do some convincing get their buy-in automatically but I think there needs to be alignment top down around how we want to organize our teams. so i think thats one Second is Are we getting out of this combination off teams and responsibilities ultimately? And it's not a self-fulfilling prophecy, right. Like just redo because we do is like. in my mind there should be business case behind that. so the outcome Should Be better for The Business In That Combined Sense Whatever That Means Right A Higher Revenue Through Maybe Better Search Performance For Example Or Lower Cost Because Of Lower Engineering.

[00:38:59] I Will Spend On Two Different Products That Are Ultimately Converging. There should be a clear case behind it. And if there is a clear-case, I think the last bit is to also organize for what that means in organizations... I've been part of on work and i don't think there's been a single one That has said Oh we like silos! We'd like to work in silos. In every organization there was a push For let's work

more topics together Let's drive topics together almost a bit like generic phrases. I've heard a lot and a lot, but it really comes down to is having actual projects that you can work on together right? So yeah That's the other part And its connected To The Second Which Is The Business Case. so in our In Our Case It Was Building A Product Together That We Think Can Perform Better In Search In LLMs But Ultimately Also For Our Users.

[00:40:05] There's other technical aspects from it. If that, for example inclusive of server-side rendering great then we have another stakeholder on board that is ultimately driving this and we can work together right? Or if we are thinking about in... or if we know that we're dependent on the partner side For example to provide data form our supply partners That will lead to how we communicate pricing or show discounts into product. Then that's how common, you know it is a common project. That we can then build and so I would Yeah So its needs also substance And it need a roadmap of these common Projects going forward in order to make it successful because otherwise You can set some goals. maybe You can have the writing on the wall, but unless there's any concrete action steps and any concrete projects to work on then I think this This like common ownership approach is probably not gonna work.

[00:41:13] another topic that you're passionate about in that we somehow Touched on a little bit with AI search and invisibility. And they also mentioned in the intro Is is AI search tracking? uh... But i know from us talking before this recording, that you are approaching it slightly different than most people. So can you share a little bit about what you're doing there? Yeah good point! Not showing super-different to others do so maybe for context. we started also early on. try and understand AI search visibility right first and foremost because I'm curious of whats happening how we ranking up performing in benchmarking against other often larger OTAs. And as part of our looking for some solution, we found one and I'm also totally aware of the limitations.

[00:42:09] This big debate going on how representative it is... For me when i first started it was almost R&D doing some research like trying to understand..I knew that in the beginning with checking only a handful of prompts not very representative AI search but also not needed, right? I just wanted a snapshot. And oftentimes you have the snapshot that snapshots spark some conversations internally. it can then create buy-in started project. all of sudden You know It gets to bold rolling and this is what happened here. We even used side note our AI search visibility. for example in Once we had tracked them more comprehensively In an earnings call and the message was look home to go a lot more visible than most of our larger OTAs competitors in classic search, and here's the picture on AI Search.

[00:43:11] So we had some proof that what we were doing previously also has good impact or positive effect on our AI search visibility. Most informally I believe because we have done extensive PR work over years high-quality coverage in essentially all the top newspapers and Europe, even the US. So that set us up really well for doing what I search. We talked about this and published it And yes as said i think got the ball rolling internally to think how we can be tactically approach it. Nevertheless there's still a lot of shortcomings To your point coming into. you know What are we doing differently? We started early on to try and use LLMs almost as a customer market research instrument, meaning that one of the first things we did was next to setting up prompt tracking is compare benchmark ourselves with our competitors.

[00:44:16] And even just qualitatively say what are for example associations that you have with home to go, and what are associations with these brands? That you don't have with Home To Go. And why?". Then we got a pretty good list of ideas for what LLMs think off us based on the entirety of internet if you will. I think my team's takeaway was well... If that something LLM know there is chance our customers knows as well right. then they see their limitations or the opportunities to break that down a bit further

and try to structure it. We haven't built any tooling around but ultimately this is sort of the next step, we do this on multiple accounts so A-on the PR team too also identify what are narratives out there about our brand?

[00:45:13] That you can double down one... And maybe even narratives they need to create because customers or LLMs don't seem to understand understand about ourselves, but for some reason we haven't spread that message before or really talked about this much in our marketing. And so now we have an indication that if you can it be showed and the next step then is measuring changing your narratives perceived? What's the impact on customers because of that?". That one thing to do maybe as example. I think just last week My HR team approached me and said, oh we've done some research on LLMs about our employer brand. So where do you have an opportunity to influence what potential candidates hold goals? Think about home-to-goals.".

[00:46:08] And I found that super interesting because internally... We naturally leaned into the AI search side within the SEO team with a lot of understanding how people search, their intent. How we build products that cater for it? We have the relationships to different stakeholders like tech team and PR team. but I really loved seeing that is not gatecapped by us right! It's not asked at had-to do it Like us as an SEO team But its sparked some interest within the company To also use LLMs And use AI Search For The Same Exercise Ultimately to see that, yeah this is the development. That's a super cool and also very interesting example. immediately thought about OpenAI and Anthropic. They both should probably also do the same like you go to Claude, then you go into Jejuity and enter hey I want to apply for a role at OpenAI in Anthropics.

[00:47:11] where should i go? And they also put their AI search or whatever teams on shaping the narratives. but can you share how your approach is Practically, like if I would for example want to start it doing for radiant. Would you recommend just having some prompts? Like tracking stuff? what do you know about radiant? is radiant a good employer? Is? What'd You Know About Their Agency Radiant? we're considering working with radiant and what's your know-about them? It's that how you approach it? or can share anything specific? yeah so We started out very basic right. this had a few thoughts about, like we have a few ideas about it. And... We just put that prompt. I think there's some key aspects to it. One is... Framing the question in certain ways so its not too biased as what good about them go and then you only focus on that but try to be objective In terms of how you set up the prompt.

[00:48:16] Second is to observe How results are surfaced that something that models typically answer just based on their world knowledge and by some of the training data. Or do they also perform searches? And if they do, what sources to be used? right? so I didn't mention it previously but this you know or think. partly a mentioned The first. tracking prompts led to an understanding how we're doing. It lead to understand what sources are being used for answering Some of those prompts we care about. Then we built a tactical roadmaps for internal hour content teams and also our PR team. So where we saw gaps, For example of competitors being listed in relevant articles And because we had the PR Team that has already plenty Of relationships with journalists set up We could use those right?

[00:49:11] It was an extension of their work almost having The ability now to understand how LLMs AI search are thinking about prompts. so That was added. I think it Was good In working and we see that content rebuild also made it into sources. It pushed visibility, so I think there's some evidence the approach is working. Nevertheless with regards to consistency after this setup its a probabilistic topic an algorithm underneath right? So you can't expect always same answer based on question. i think thats something We haven't quite hundred percent figured out. But we also think more about directional results, rather than putting a numeric value behind it. We would just understand how the answers are changing over time and if something we did has influenced that so... It is more about the sentiment

maybe of the answer rather then the answer has to be specifically always to hundred percent the same because we know and see that isn't.

[00:50:19] And you'll also see And I think Madi has talked about this multiple times with his team, PKI that model algorithms are also changing. The variety of how often they do search and do fan out queries in Search and Highlight Search results is somewhat changing over time. so it makes the tracking a little bit trickier but not impossible right? correctness, but things like overall sentiment and big air sediment analysis that we use for that. But more so running these... And then not even on a daily level, but even in the monthly levels to see if some of the actions we have done are starting to influence it? Yeah! That's maybe some practical tips around it—to NOT go too scientific at first trying to understand the themes and then break them down for you internally, measure results after having taken some action.

[00:51:27] And in terms of AI search interfaces do you see as relevant not necessarily only connected with sentiment tracking but also general tracking? talk of the town I'd say, off Chatchabity basically overtaking Google and i think everybody that looks at a couple of actual data points knows that. The growth is insane. it's like come to stay but google isn't going anywhere? And then recently spoke to Malta from PKI about perplexity where he was surprised or... Oh, he was not surprised because you said perplexity has no mode. So seeing the usage numbers of Perplexity going down with something that he felt like is probably inevitable to happen. but I'd like to get your opinion on what is relevant? Is it AI Overviews, AI Mode, RGB Perplexities, Gemini... Because there are so many options for people to track?

[00:52:31] Yeah It's a good question! There's almost some SEO disease, I think to say. Yeah. SEOs are turning into lawyers. actually you know? I noticed that heavily we started doing a lot of lawyer talk like it depends... Never be specific and never give anything away. just say the thing. Exactly! What we do is on top of search prompt and brand entity tracking is to measure referring traffic from LLMs. I mean, that's the hardest currency we have and how many users do they actually get from JetGPT? From Gemini or Cloth etc.? What you can see there... I think it's mirroring almost completely all of the market share benchmarks out there That vast majority of traffic are coming from Jet GPT. Now what is hidden in those numbers?

[00:53:34] Gemini, I think Google disclosed last earnings called about like six hundred seven hundred million or so monthly active users now. So caching up with the chat GBT. but i think that's inclusive of AI overviews aI mode and their ability to off Distributing. they are products right for these us. on search when you can see Search converging ultimately clack classic search With Ai mode searches converging further. and further thing You click on ai Overviews. now on search and see more, you're getting directly into AI mode. Right? On desktop for example, AI mode is already the standard button. if you hit enter You can still get regular search results. But If The Button Is Or AI Mode So You Click Get Into AI Mode And so It Can See That Experience Commerging Further & Further.

[00:54:26] I think a large amount of users that are using AI mode and AI overviews that engage with those anyway. And then the few that actually do click out, they're then disguised as Google before. So we won't know. and on top of that I think there's a large amount off users that can even track. so even tracking right like we all were grown up in an area where performance marketing was performed marketing era when you able to track everything every single touch point. i think thats gotten alot more opaque now. I think platforms make it harder and harder to track users coming from their platforms, too your website the few that still do. And so We for example also see there like not only has referral traffic Massively increased from LLM So that growth you were talking about we definitely seen out in the numbers and then year-on-year It's crazy But we all succeed at.

[00:55:27] You know That traffic is is not growing as much anymore? seasonality now, that usually

happens in our industry. Also be present in the numbers coming from LLMs and so we don't necessarily think about you know... We need to optimize for Gemini or for ChatGPT or for Claude really thinking how can we influence off home-to-go platform visibility together? And almost like we approached building search visibility over the years, which was not really saying oh we do it for Google or Bing. Or for Yandex or Cessna and other search engines like we follow the approach in others converge And I think this is how i would Think about This as well. that set? I know them. The majority of users come from from chat to BT receiving numbers.

[00:56:22] It's the biggest consumer brand. In my mind based on their numbers out there. the marketplace side where I'm sitting on within home to go group is also consumer brand. So, see there's a big overlap. that why we tend to focus on Unchatched CPT in terms of visibility measurements not too much in perplexity To be honest. and then yeah Gemini Google as said i think this it's hard to differentiate between The exact surface on google that users came from given everyone is somehow using Google search results anyway, I think it all comes back to that. So if we do well on Google then... We're not doing too bad in these other surfaces. they leverage those results. Maybe a question around bridging the two main topics?

[00:57:11] We focused on A product and then B like AI Search Visibility Tracking etc. ChatGPT has recently made the move to integrate more and more apps, basically into the chat GPT product. Also for example Booking.com. so I'm not a hundred percent aware if it's already live in Germany or EU but It seems that this is a strategy where they just want to bring the interfaces from well-known brands and products To the chat gpt product. Is there also something You could see happening for Home to Go, or maybe is there already something that you can share? So what's your take on this? bringing the products into the AI chatbots. Yeah definitely something we are working on. I actually looked at a demo in two days ago On an MCP home-to-go alpha product if you will.

[00:58:15] That brings our inventory and search experience onto platforms. Maybe to zoom out a little bit from that, I think not too sure if everyone's aware of like the OTA space but i think the number of times OTAs and platforms have been pronounced dead is correlating with how many times SEO has been called death. similar approach right? Always the fear of disintermediation ,the next disruption technical will surface more direct results and pull more, you know the direct supply etc. I think that there's some truth in their right. at this same time how we think about it is That with regards to platforms a platform shift And by the way they open my eyes like there are some internal memos. i think people have not mentioned it In one of his podcast as well.

[00:59:10] It's pretty clear that They want to become The next operating system right? Like check gbt and likes. they want To be your standard choice and then route any type of action task question from there on, which means that I think for us it is an opportunity to bring our really good inventory. Good pricing with you know curation ultimately data quality user reviews etc., To that space right? Um i Think the strategic decisions to be made to what extent? uh...I believe Amazon has decided not allow perplexity in your example. They have more to lose than to win, right? Like they want to keep the user within their ecosystem. If anything that wants use there bought roofers in order to go shopping on third party platforms are going against this strategy.

[01:00:01] and think just others in a market larger OTA is potentially dead will go along same line. so you know making the connection too. it's at end of platform and marketplace as we knew I wouldn't call The end of the day yet. There's few things we notice as well, with disruptions. overall adoption takes time. right now it like there are some users using open AI Gemini AI search in general for discovery. We see this because off what I mentioned earlier the quality of uses etc. and the quality Of traffic is higher. This less coming. but the ones that are coming That they seem to have already made some decisions at

least and looking for options. And so it's making sure we influence that decision-making, having narratives in place to help them as much as they can.

[01:00:55] Ultimately I think there is a lot of that protects platforms nevertheless right? Our supply relationships were built over years. if you look at the supply side from home to go... It has very different aggregation levels layers from single host to small property manager managing few properties to hundreds, two thousands through tens of thousands. To larger OTA partners and I don't even know if platforms have the incentives to build integrations with all of those right? And The product then stands and falls with the amount of choice you have in the inventory you present automatically also a lot goes wrong and travel like. we know this from our customer service request AI such to book, but do I want to risk my annual family vacation with my wife and kids?

[01:01:53] And leave it to CHEF CBT? what if something goes wrong. You know i'm the one to blame so this might not age well But I would think that there are some products in categories That may be more affected by this. first Anything that's easily comparable like e-commerce, I buy a Samsung phone. Plenty of supplies is all about price. it's you know about delivery speed maybe because right? It's a lot easier to compare versus vacations are quite tailored and what i want very different from someone else has one. And so while I see there some use cases where I booked the same hotel always again Again and again Maybe let my agent do that in the future. And we certainly want to be present and test, learn with our MCP in bringing that into LMS.

[01:02:45] but the majority of users are now bypassing marketplaces. Our curation, trust they build, we provide payment options all of them sending their agents directly to a property manager. I'd say at least not in the near future. so could you see where for example what you did as a platform to the very scattered inventory that is obviously out there. So if you think about, I have to go all of these individual hosts. they don't want to front anyone here but maybe rather scrappy WordPress websites etc., so basically we had heavy lifting on our platforms and created an inventory with great user experience for people who have great pricing like you said. On top of that, having a chat GPT that has access to your whole inventory and is also tailored more towards enabling people to ask specific questions about it.

[01:03:47] So not just very generic because I mean i feel like. so far It hasn't been done. So what we had was always things with instant checkout etc.. So I think it never really worked. like meta are also discontinued at last year. No, obviously everybody's super hyped about the agent to agent protocol and ACP and UCP. So could you imagine a future where I can ask Judgeability? And then Judgeability goes home-to-go... ...and basically have full conversation with my family around the table. we have Judgeability in the middle of the table speaking. it is our personalized travel guide based on the heavy lifting data inventory, etc. that home to go provided? And it was a long question! Yeah I mean certainly right. i wouldn't want to rule out.

[01:04:42] hence why we are also preparing for by making inventory available To AI search services and platforms. so mcp is one you know ucp agent-to-agent your name until We want to make sure that for the use cases, it makes sense as a group or business. But also our users are requesting it and we can serve them. right now. I think the integration you have download an app within the AI Search App Store is not very seamless. i would think only small share of users actually do this but more it becomes standard. Let's say Chatcha BT and the likes as your first stop. The more context, data knowledge Your assistant has about you I think that the more compelling it also is a use case to use It And certainly types of searches.

[01:05:46] around which destination should i choose? Where Should i go and where is it warm in winter for example That already happening? We see this in our data. I'm seeing less and lesser of that because it's exactly the type of questions you just ask. Now, the last step so to say for the booking?

Sure probably right like i can see a future where That happens for some use cases. but they can also see Abilities. four platforms to make them more attractive too. go in book directly right. So for example We have we have mobile rates with some of our suppliers if you book and an app rate. So if you book through your phone, we give you... And for your app will give a better price than if you booked on desktop? We know that because we want to use the app more loyal overalls.

[01:06:45] so I could also think of strategies where You would use those platforms as another channel like search. is one now or later almost like a segue or an ability to attract them, ordinarily give them and incentive the book directly with you though. I can see that happening as well but don't think it's black-and-white because what will happen is not going to happen. then there'll be very new ones. so i assume platforms are included. we have good instruments too. make sure our interests are still kept that is paid and probably as type of an affiliate commission, there's also a fair share based on the value delivered. So few considerations but definitely preparing for their type-of future with this setup of MCP and Deluxe.

[01:07:39] Would you agree that current time was one of most exciting times since basically SEO has become a thing? Yeah Definitely I said to someone last like a few months ago. actually SEO has always evolved and always changed, but it never changes that much. Maybe besides very early days where all of a sudden the algo was like flippant on his head... There's lot of volatility overall in terms of fundamental changes. I feel this is probably our society total. But zooming-in definitely also to SEO. It also creates interesting like debates, right? Like we can all see this on SEO LinkedIn and X. And so where... We have heavy debates about should it be called GEO or AEO. is an SEO that's all-encompassing and you know Is the same tactics different tactics?

[01:08:45] I feel a bit like that My King mentioned as one of his topics. It seems to me there are some missed opportunities. So yes let us figure out. I think the more interesting question and, um... The more interesting application of this is to-to think about. Okay so we as teams in organizations how can we drive that change? Right it's leading a bit back toward what we discussed earlier In terms of setup because if your team has already set up That way and hasn't worked in the unity between PR Content creation management an SEO on the past Think maybe there's not much changes or tactical change. And then you can debate you know, all the content optimization and chunking and slicing and dicing like to what extent do want to play that?

[01:09:34] But in terms of organizational setup. You're already one step ahead with others That let's say SEO is its own channel. or as part of marketing We have a dedicated PR team. um...you maybe have a Dedicated Content Team..You don't have aligned goals To incentivize teams to also work on it. All of sudden. It is an exciting opportunity, but how do we go about it? When I think that's something and don't see much discuss like what the reality in companies needs to change. In terms of team set up incentive structures leadership and change management in order to enable teams also work together make sure they can understand are doing. then maybe build a product features or marketing narratives the content learning pages in order to influence.

[01:10:25] that is something I'm more interested and would like discuss, find out a bit about how others are doing it. It's also sort of underneath our narrative. so my interpretation is teams have been already organized this way and form to go with one of those we've always approached as... It's PR, it is data-led storytelling. Its press coverage and its making sure that this has also reflected then within the product and paired with a good landing experience. those teams don't see much of change for them in natural extensions versus. if you were very focused on maybe just onsite or offsite authority building and brand building as nothing have ever been in contact Then it's much more of a change and needs Yeah, I think more of the change process to enable that.

[01:11:26] And is maybe then also driving parts of the discussions we are We're seeing. Felix i know That you Are very passionate about this topic but i also Know that You have A team To run at home to go. so? I want to wrap up Our conversation a little bit and i Have a final question for you that Maybe could Also work as a segway actually to do an update episode a couple Of months down The road. So my final question is, and I bluntly stole this from Lenny's podcast. From the U S what didn't we talk about that? We should have talked about good questions may be very specific but one thing That i'm not supposed to Lenny actually or another a podcasting newsletter if i read This in but i thought About this quite A bit since then Is One of our when i give you some context first.

[01:12:16] so one Of Our moments almost when I did this exercise of tracking our brand associations within LLMs also compared to other OTAs. One of the findings was that we were often identified as price leader, someone who would have good pricing. and why is it? because... We are coming from a meta-search history or legacy at home to go. That's how we started. then build all these services on top. users could book, check out contact customer service and use our payment etc. over time. So we closed that gap if you will but I found it interesting. the association because of the meta search positioning back then is still price comparison And they made me thinking what you know, more of our strength rather than trying to fix our weaknesses.

[01:13:19] And I think that will be my question so isn't that the strategy? That things we're already doing well with double down on and do better rather then uh... Trying to fix weaknesses or you know.. Things that we aren't! Yeah i think thats something i like to talk about maybe in a different episode. That definitely gives it food for thought, basically. For everyone no matter for AI search or just in general terms of company strategy. So Felix thanks so much for taking the time to share. I feel like you're not doing this often and i'm very happy that you agreed. And there was a lot involved Not only in marketplace business models but also how to navigate an organization through. Yeah, one of the biggest changes we have in this ecosystem since ever.

[01:14:16] So thanks so much for that. if people want to like follow you what is the best place? To do that? I think just probably best two following and Two contact. And yeah there's specific questions. also then happy too How to respond by email or so awesome. And otherwise, maybe if people are watching this and looking for a new opportunity probably Home to Go has always interesting opportunities across really not only product but also other areas. So go check out hometogo.com. slash jobs or slash career? Probably something like that. Correct yeah! Also reach out directly. we're in fact actually looking for principal product manager right now on my team To drive some of those topics I mentioned at the beginning.

[01:15:08] Nice And if you are looking, and this sounded interesting then yes please do to reach out. Cool we will put the links into description below Felix. thanks so much. I think yeah We'll watch the space closely. i Will watch what home to go is doing closely? Then let's see If we can catch up in a couple of months. Sounds good. Thanks for having me had a lot fun Great discussion!