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**Host:** You can stay with us right here because we are about to have an absolutely epic panel conversation on SEO Analytics and Measurement. To moderate this conversation is my good friend and friend of Confab, Miss Rebekah Baggs. Hi, there you are. How are you?

**Rebekah Baggs:** Hi, I'm so thrilled to be here. [chuckles] So thrilled.

**Host:** I'm so thrilled to have you here. Where are you calling in from? Caller, where are you—

**Rebekah:** Phoenix, Arizona. County Phoenix, Arizona. It's hot.

**Host:** Right. How hot is it?

**Rebekah:** It's about 100 degrees, the peak of the day.

**Host:** That's just low-ball me. My brother and his family live in Phoenix, in Gilbert, and my dad lives there part of the year in a good year. The minute it starts to hit midday, he's like, "Get me out." We're there. I'm in— [crosstalk]

**Rebekah:** That's a nice and neat strategy.

**Host:** Okay. Hey, I need to actually go off the screen so that you can introduce your other panel members, but I'm so excited. There's so much expertise in the room and I know that this is an incredibly hot and popular topic for content strategists everywhere. This information and data, we've talked about this so often over the last day and a half, but how important it is to be able to share and defend it and ground smart content decisions in data that is meaningful and relevant to what needs to happen for a user and for a business. I'm going to let you take it away from here. Thank you, Rebekah.

**Rebekah:** Thank you, [inaudible 00:01:49]. Bye. [chuckles] All right, everyone, well, going to wait for my panel friends to join me, then we'll get started. Hello. Well, before we kick things off today, I want to introduce you to these fine and lovely folks. We've got Dana DiTomaso, she is the president and partner at Kick Point, where she helps people in teams do better marketing and set goals that actually help you measure whether what you're doing is bringing value or just wasting a ton of money. Obviously, it's really fun. We've got Aaron Baker, he works at a little college, you might have heard of it, Harvard University, affairs and communications, where he's the Associate Director of Content Strategy and evangelizes the importance of tracking and using data to make sure that your content is actually providing the right for each point.

Then we have Chris, my best friend and business partner. He is the partner at ONWARD, all around technical SEO pro/information architect. You wouldn't believe it, it's an interesting combo, but it works. They're here today to talk to— Oops, it happened. I knew it was going to happen and I'm sorry. It's my first day wearing AirPods and

they're falling out and I'm sorry. All right. [laughs] Anyways, today, we're going to be talking about this overlap between SEO and satisfying search and pen-testing.

Our goal is to give you not the full scoop on all of those things, because the cost of each of those are huge, but just to give you an idea of what's possible in that space and to leave you with some tools and ideas around just getting this work done and pulling in the resources you need to do that. To kick things off, I wanted to open it up with a question for you, Chris. Today, our conversation centers on this overlap between organic search optimization and defining and measuring content success and testing. Right? Just huge. Where should someone get started? If we could hear from you, Chris, and just go around and hear from Dana as well.

**Chris Corak:** Sounds good. From an SEO perspective, obviously defining and measuring success is supercritical in SEO. It's foundational, it guides the work that we do, it helps us understand if what we're doing is actually working or not, just helpful to know. It also helps us show value to people so we can continue to do this kind of work in the future. If I had to mention just one place to start with SEO, it would be that you really need to know how your users define success, and understanding search intent can help you out with that. Search intent is the reason that somebody came to a search engine in the first place, it's that question that they were looking to have answered, it's that task that they were looking to accomplish, that piece of information that they needed to learn more about before they made an important decision.

If we're aware of what those—we understand what those user needs are, then we can make sure we're accounting for those needs in our designs, we can make sure our content speaks to those most important questions that people have and that the most important pieces of information are easy to find within a site structure too. Obviously, it's always important in your work to—we always need to map back to business goals, but I just want to mention from an SEO perspective how important it is to strike a good balance between business and user needs too.

Starting off with analyzing intent around whatever it is your organization does is the place that we start with. We look to analyze intent by digging into keyword data and use tools like SEMrush, is probably our favorite. Moz's Keyword Explorer is another good one, ahrefs.com is a great one too. There's a lot of tools out there at your disposal. If you're looking to dive in and learn more about this, get a little more hands-on, we'll reference some links and some articles that can get you started.

Actually, last year too, Rebekah and I co-presented and did a talk on the intersection of content design in SEO. It was about where to get started in creating a human-centered SEO strategy, and one of those components was understanding search intent. We can send a link out to that deck too, which can help you get started. Really, just from a high-level SEO perspective, it all starts with understanding intent, documenting those user needs, and then we're diving into analytics to understand how we're doing in terms of satisfying intent, and where some opportunities lie, and where we're not doing a great job of satisfying intent too. Dana, do you want to jump in and tell everyone where you get started?

**Dana DiTomaso:** Yes, you bet. We'll fight about tools later because my favorite tool is Ahrefs, actually. [laughs]

**Chris:** Oh, okay. I love it. I still love it. We're subscribed to both.

**Dana:** We can discuss it. I think we were subscribed to both, but anyway, what I find where people really struggle when it comes to the idea of SEO and content is they think too much about robots and they don't think enough about human beings, and they think, "Well, I have to make sure this content is SEO," like some magical SEO fairy comes and sprinkles fairy dust on the content, but it's just not how it works. I think there's definitely a balance between writing good content and writing content that is good for SEO, and the two are not at cross purposes. In fact, they should be part of one single thing.

I find that this is where, when you're defining this content practice, like when you decide, "Okay, these are the keywords that I want this article to rank for," you don't have to decide that and then write the article. You could write the article and then look at the keywords, for example. It doesn't have to be a linear process of keywords, write a thing, make it super roboty, publish it, get links. I think that that's where tools like Ahrefs, Moz's Keyword Explorer is also another excellent tool. SEMrush can help you decide what those keywords are, but definitely don't approach it from a keyword-first perspective at all times.

I think actually, currently what's happening with COVID-19 is a good example because there isn't any COVID-19 keyword volume in any of the tools, it's too soon. No one knows. A lot of it is just Googling stuff and then seeing what comes up in the auto-suggest, for example, or radical suggestion, asking your clients or customers what they would search for. A lot of what we've been doing right now is saying like, "Call please," saying to our clients, call one of your clients, say to them, "If you wanted information on how we do pest control right now," for example, "what would you Google?" Then that's what we write about.

I think that that's also a totally legitimate and good place to start when it comes to keyword research, because at the end of this, you're ultimately serving your users. You don't want to focus too much on the Googles because what they want day-to-day is also, they change their minds a lot, but users themselves will not change their minds.

**Rebekah:** That's great. I love that you bring up this talking to real users and actually asking about search behavior. I talk to UX researchers all the time because Chris and I, we try and hit home, it's not about pleasing Google, it's about pleasing people and having the technical infrastructure that Google needs to understand that you're doing that. Adding that lens to interviews is so important where you're talking to real people and also just asking anecdotally about their search behavior.

I wanted to just take one step back before we get to Aaron and ask you about just setting goals, in general. I know you do a lot of work where you come into organizations that might have goals set, not even just for SEO, but in general for content, that can be counterproductive to actually providing value. They might be chasing vanity metrics.

People might be really unclear on what the goal is. How did you get started, just setting goals and those kinds of situations?

**Dana:** Yes, so usually, we tell them, like, start with your strategic plan for the next year, five years. Obviously, everyone's revising those right now, but a lot of these goals that people have said on these global strategies are actually crappy. You get goals like **[inaudible 00:10:50]** improve stakeholder relations. What does that mean? Who's a stakeholder? We know when we've gotten there, right? I think that that can be really difficult for people to understand, and I think there's also other goals too.

If I can think of another one, there was a great example of a pest control company I was talking to, who wasn't a client, but they actually approached me at MozCon and they said, "We're having a big issue with bad reviews," and what it dialed down to was that they were incentivizing people signing up new leads, but they weren't actually caring very much about how the service was being delivered, which was resulting in poor reviews, because people would get signed up, and then they would get shitty service and they would disappear into the ether. I think that that's something important to think about as well, is what part of the goal are you incentivizing and is that going to result in you having a poor experience with the end task?

**Rebekah:** Yes, absolutely. [crosstalk] to this, like, oh, go ahead, sorry.

**Aaron Baker:** Yes, I think that—

**Dana:** No, no, not having to, go ahead. I was going to say, Aaron. [chuckles]

**Aaron:** Thanks, I was going to add that at Harvard, things are a little different because we operate like a large nonprofit. In my office, which is like central comms, PR, and the news office all rolled into one team, we have two major properties, and they have two very different SEO needs. We have the Harvard homepage, which is like a front door and when people are looking for information from that site, they're searching for majors, or concentrations, or academic programs, and the SEO knowledge that we get helps us fuel navigation and wayfinding because the information that they're looking for on that site, it's usually not on that site.

Then when you look at the *Harvard Gazette*, which is a news publication, we think about SEO in a very different way. We try to optimize the headlines that are—we run with two sets of headlines. One is esoteric and can be the display head for an article or a story, and then we also run with an alternate headline, which is for SEO purposes, it's much more clickable. It's much more like getting you to the point. On the *Gazette*, because these are news articles and they're published in time, we don't do any optimization on them, because that would be weird. We, yes, [chuckles] we use that information to help us fuel what else we write about.

The writing staff is very—we write about things that Harvard is researching, or we write about Harvard students, faculty, alumni, and their scholarly activity. It runs the gamut when you think about what can you study at Harvard, you can study a million different

things. The SEO really helps us define the taxonomy of the news story in a way and then on the homepage, we're doing much more optimization where we have a page about the history of Harvard, for example, and that page is always going to be there. We have a lot of evergreen content. We have a long time to tweak that and use SEO and other metrics to help us figure out the path forward for that content.

**Rebekah:** Yes, that's great and I think he raised up this really important point. Oh, go ahead. Sorry, Dana.

**Dana:** I was going to ask Aaron about something about your content strategy. When you publish articles, of course, you're not SEO-ing them because that would be weird, as you said. How do you handle things like internal links to shape where you want to make sure the keyword focus stays, you're not ending up with too many different pages ranking for some of your most important keywords?

**Aaron:** That's a very good question. I think we could always do better at that, but in general, we try to have recommendation engines on each article that help point to related content. That's the path forward with news content. It's not that we're going to optimize the article itself. I certainly try to do workshops with the writers and tell them well, if you're writing about a very specific kind of cancer, please also use the word cancer. [chuckles] I think that there's some really obvious things that you can do that don't require a lot of data, but I think the magic happens, where it's very useful for me as an analyst, is looking at what else people might want to read.

One of our organizational goals is to encourage serial reading, like, "Okay, you came here to read this one article because perhaps you searched for it. Now, why don't you read this other article," or in fact, if it's about COVID, for example, we have a whole series of things for you to read about. I think that's how we try to corral that activity into one place.

**Dana:** Cool, thank you.

**Chris:** Yes, yes, something else that we do too, in addition to just understanding that common terminology you could be using around a certain topic, is studying some of that more passive form of search intent too, like what are those common questions that people have or what kind of information do they need around cancer to help them out in a certain scenario? There's beyond keyword targeting, there's a lot you can do within search intent research to basically help think about page structure and what could be included within the design of a page too.

**Rebekah:** Yes, because you bring up an important point that I think a lot about, I come from a project strategy background. When I first met Chris and started work with him, I was honestly very grossed out by SEO. I did see this divide between I work at US, where we care about user needs, and you work at SEO where you work for robots, get-behind-me thing. [chuckles] It was interesting to hear Chris talk about search intent as a form of user research, where I could learn Google as a psychology or database of

human psychology and I could learn about how people behave and what they care about and what their priorities are by studying how they search.

That was interesting because you're talking about it's not—it goes beyond just optimizing around keywords, where you're actually looking at what are the things that people care about around the subject matter, and how can I make sure that I'm looking at the priority of that in terms of search volume, and just mirroring that back to them, and making sure that my article answers those questions, addresses those priorities in the right form of hierarchy. That was a super important point for me that helped really change the way I saw SEO and helped me see optimization as something that really was for people, instead of a lesser writing around certain keywords or writing for robots.

Aaron, you brought up something that was really interesting when you're talking about, obviously, we don't want to optimize articles, we have certain areas of our site that matter more for SEO and then certain areas that don't. I think this is huge. Chris and I work with organizations, and a lot of times, we'll see people, there's this dissonance between, "Well, what are people actually searching for," because when it's this overlay of people are searching for this information and that's where the search opportunity lies. Then there's this other stuff that we really want people to see but maybe no one's searching for it, and it probably doesn't really matter if we optimize it or not, it's not the best opportunity.

How do you guys go about helping people understand and set appropriate goals and metrics for content that's important to our organization versus content that's important to users, and creating that right balance?

**Aaron:** Well, I'll start, I think that it's a very good question and one of the tools that I give back to the organization in terms of data or dashboards, I break out all incoming traffic into channel groupings that we've customized, and search is one of those channel groupings, of course, but I also benchmark in the case of news content, I benchmark how much traffic we expect, or let's say how much traffic does an average story receive from this channel on this day, after publication. I think one of the major successes we've had is to benchmark what you can expect to get from search, as far as your total number of pages for a day, and chart that over time so people can honestly see if they're performing over-under, and that combined with how we see, by date, people coming in to an article when we've distributed something ourselves, like posted the article on social, Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn.

We can see those streams coming in as well, and then we see a before and after effect sometimes, where we'll publish an article about how does COVID-19 affect children, and then days later because we posted the article, we might see a residual bump from earned social sources where people are sharing the article themselves, but then way later, we'll start to see the search traffic trickle in. I think it's a long tail game for us. It definitely impacts the ways in which we use that data.

**Dana:** I really liked how you figure out number of days since the articles was published because I think that that's an important metric to people [inaudible 00:20:57] focus on if they publish [inaudible 00:20:59] piece and not just everybody [inaudible 00:21:01].

**Aaron:** Yes. You can publish something and no one will ever know that you did that. I think that the daily metrics are very helpful for us. It's helped us get a really good understanding for setting expectations, and we do this for all kinds of metrics, not just visits from search. It was very key in helping us understand when we can expect to see things because it's not necessarily how many days it was since it was published. It's really how many days since we pushed it out. Content distribution is really the name of the game there.

**Rebekah:** Yes, absolutely.

**Dana:** Actually, writing this [crosstalk] is just FYI.

**Aaron:** We'll talk after.

[chuckling]

**Chris:** I was going to say too, Aaron, I love that you guys are trying to set expectations before you even launch something and really understanding what this search opportunity might be or even social, what's the likelihood of this getting visibility in certain angles. To your point, Rebekah, sometimes content is really important, but it might not be something that somebody is actively looking for. We just need to make sure that people see it through other experiences, like we could think about, well, what are those popular articles or what are those popular pages on your site that are relevant to this topic?

You know people will be entering there. You could think about strong cross-linking structures to make sure people know about your new article that is about a relevant topic.

**Rebekah:** Yes, absolutely. This forward path and outward path, are they getting here? What are the different connections we need to make between, you maybe can leverage content that's related to that subject matter, but that does have a lot of search potential as a gateway to that important content that doesn't necessarily have the organic [inaudible 00:23:01]? That's a great point.

Since we're talking about expectation, expectations are so key. Thinking really having the wrong expectations can derail a project. How do you guys go about setting expectations in the work that you do? And part of that question is, what can't this work do? A lot of times people have these really fantastical pictures of, they're going to employ this SEO strategy or they're going to start tracking and measuring things and they're just going to see these results overnight. That isn't the way this works.

How do you set expectations and how do you communicate what is possible in this work, what it can't **[inaudible 00:23:50]**?

**Dana:** I can start with that. I would say that one of the things for sure is just set the expectations low first off. Let's not go crazy. For example, when we do site migrations from old domains to new domains, we tell people there's going to be a 30–50% drop in traffic as the Google figures things out, and then if that doesn't happen, you look like a magical rock star. Set those expectations super low.

I think the other thing too is really to get a sense from people like, what are you expecting to have happen but then why do you have that expectation? Because at some point, SEO has been around long enough that somebody went to a seminar at some point and heard something. Because they may not be super versed in it, interpreted it the wrong way, or they may think something—like something we run into a lot is people thinking you can track absolutely everything, but you can't.

In fact, you can track less now than you were able to even a couple of years ago. Just being really honest about what's possible, then sometimes people do their own research and they'll say, "Oh, I sent you this article from a blogger who shall remain unnamed, when they said that we can do this." It's like, well, you can, but here's the downsides of it. It's really just building up a lot of that trust that when you tell people like, "Here's the problem with Safari, it deletes cookies after a day." This is the impact of Safari. Safari is 18% of your users. For 18% of your users, we actually have no idea how often they come to the site, for example. Just really laying it out for them.

Then also keeping them apprised. Even if they're not super interested in what's going on for cookies, just a quick email to be like, "Hey, FYI, Firefox is now doing ITP too. That's going to affect Firefox the same way it affects Safari." Just keeping people informed. Even sometimes if we don't actively have a contract with clients, we might just drop them a line and say, "Hey, look, we know this is going to be a problem for you, just FYI," and not like, "Give us money and we'll figure stuff," you should **[inaudible 00:25:40]** on this.

I think **[inaudible 00:25:43]** setting expectations so that doesn't come back to you, "Well, you didn't warn us, therefore you're a horrible person." I think that that's really important.

**Rebekah:** Yes, absolutely, so key.

**Aaron:** I would—just to follow up a little bit on that, I'm sorry, then Chris after—I think that one of the things that I'm picking up from Dana is that you have to explain that you don't know everything when sometimes, if you're successful in an organization, people start to think that you do know everything, and people will come to me and say, "Well, when I searched for X, the page that we have for that is not coming up and why is that? Why don't you fix it?" I'm like, "Well, there are words you asked me not to use and that's the word that you're using to search. [chuckles] I can't really help you rank this page for that query when you don't want me to use that word on that page."

There's like— Sometimes you really have to set people down and say, "Look, this is how this all works." I think I spend a lot of my time explaining how data collection works, and it changes every day.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely. That's so key.

**Dana:** I feel like I've spent a lot of time explaining to people—sorry. I feel like I spend a lot of time explaining to people you can't make someone Google things. I think that that's a good way to start. It's just that you cannot force the Googling.

**Rebekah:** Yes. You guys are both bringing up a really important point, and I'm sure you guys have all heard of, like, doing a roadshow or just educating people on what's possible and making sure we're all speaking the same language and know how these things work. "What can search do? How does this operate?" can be so important and just getting everyone on the same page and knowing what's possible.

Chris and I, we often do things like lunch and learns, or we've heard some of our clients will hold things like open office hours where someone is working on a new piece of content or a new section of the site. They can come and just ask questions about what's possible here and why should I approach it in this way or that way, but having that education and having those conversations is so key.

Oh, Aaron, you mentioned that sometimes people will want to rank for something that they can't use a certain word. This reminded me of a situation where we were working with a client and they had these brand guidelines where they couldn't use—like it was a supplementary insurance. They couldn't say supplementary insurance. They had to call it voluntary benefits. It turns out nobody uses "voluntary benefits." Everyone called it supplementary insurance or life insurance. That's just how people search for it.

Their brand guidelines were in direct conflict with how humans actually describe and search for things. It made it really hard because you couldn't even use the right search term on the homepage or on some of the key pages, and so setting those expectations and at least letting people know, "Hey, we can stick to these guidelines that we have these and these standards, but here's what might happen, or here's how people are actually describing things." Is there a better balance **[inaudible 00:29:12]** can be so helpful too.

**[inaudible 00:29:16]** some questions from folks and wanted to hop over to those. One of the questions here is something about specific metrics. It's actually from Malaika. Hi, Malaika. I know you. She says, "What are the specific metrics that you look at to make a determination for things like wayfinding or navigation taxonomy, evaluating search intent, and assessing content effectiveness? What are the specific metrics that we use?"

**Dana:** Chris, do you want to start?

**Rebekah:** You want to go first?

**Chris:** Yes, sure. From an SEO perspective, I feel like quite often, we're chasing people away from defining the main success for SEO by vanity metrics and we're trying to guide them more towards business outcomes. It might be something like, someone's first instinct might be to judge the success of SEO by rankings or impressions or even traffic or something, when really, an organization doesn't exist to get a ranking in Google, or to get an impression there, or to get a clip cake exists for some specific purpose for the community, or they sell a product and service and that's what they do. We try to guide people towards tracking metrics that would be closest to accomplishing those business outcomes for our organization and what metrics might map back to their organizational goals.

Just a quick example I'm thinking of, there was a client that Rebekah and I were working with in the last year or so. When we first started working with them, they were super pumped and jazzed that they just hit their organizational goal of increasing organic search traffic by 10%, and then they found out that over that same time, they had decreased their main conversion of sales by 15%. A lot of these can be false indicators, and in this case, they were getting more of the wrong people to the site and less of the right kind. It's interesting in SEO, sometimes even getting less people, if it's a narrow focus and it's the right people, might be the right answer.

I guess one last thing to add would be, we're thinking in terms of macro-conversions, micro-conversions, and then indicators. We'll do something like, those macro-conversions will be the closest thing to somebody's business outcomes. For an e-commerce site, it might be revenue or somebody's sales, it might be a lead, a restaurant. It could even be phone calls and orders or getting directions. The second group would be the micro-conversions, would be signs that indicators that people will one day turn into a macro-conversion. They've shown some interest like downloading a white paper or engaging in some way, and then these third levels of metrics we might use to look at things like traffic.

For our own evaluation purposes, we'll look at traffic or behind the scenes. We'll care a little bit about rankings, but we're definitely trying not to center that in on our client and have it be the main way we define success.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely. Malaika, your question, you asked about things like taxonomy and navigation and wayfinding. Those things, we're typically looking at pageviews. We're trying to be, there's a couple of things—one, are the labels we're using in our taxonomy and in our navigation, the category names that we're calling things, do they reflect how people actually talk about things, and you can learn that for search data? Like, "Oh, more people describe it this way than they do this other way." Like I mentioned with voluntary benefits for supplemental insurance, we try and make sure that that data of, "Okay, we see more people describe it this way, can we mirror that in our navigation and our taxonomy?"

That's one thing that we'll do, and then in terms of measuring, you said what specific metrics do you use to measure search intent? Like Chris mentioned, search intent is just a goal. It's a piece of information you want, it's a question you have, you need to get

answered. It's the product you're trying to find. We just try and make sure that every single goal we have is mapped back to those micro- and macro-conversions, and a lot of those specific-intent goals are actually micro-conversions that you can see what pieces of content do we have and answer those questions or that provide that piece of information and what kind of engagement are we getting. Well, Dana.

**Dana:** I would say, well, first off, I really wish in Google Analytics you could do micro- and macro-conversions. What we do for that is, everything is tracked as an event and then we make our own conversions in Data Studio after the fact. We also do things like, a PDF download is a micro-conversion, not a macro, but it's still important to record it as an event and then see how it relates later on. Something else too when it comes to things like search intent specifically, I love Google Data Studio. I've talked about it a lot. If you Google videos that are out there on the internet, they probably won't be talking about Google Data Studio, but one of the things I really like about it is you can blend together different data sources.

One blend that I've been experimenting with recently for one of our clients is taking their list of keywords that they want certain pages to rank for and then matching that up with Google Search Console data and then seeing if those pages actually do come up for those specific keywords and then looking at the overall percentage of clicks from those keywords that are actually from the keywords that they wanted.

Then you can see which pages are maybe attracting weird, irrelevant traffic that you weren't expecting or certain issues. "Hey, this—we're ranking for this and we weren't expecting that. That's awesome. What can we do with this?" There's definitely some different things you can do with that lens. I also think she had a question too about measuring content engagement. There's an approach, we can make a link to this out there on the key point website for a Google Tag Manager recipe, which is called content consumption and it records that people have actually read, in theory that's measuring three metrics that we can actually measure, that should tell you if people have read your content or not.

**Rebekah:** That sounds [crosstalk]

**Aaron:** Just to follow up on that, the way we measure content engagement is similarly using Google Tag Manager helpers and we have definitely, we're trying to track engaged time tracking. This is not a time that you see in native Google Analytics, because that metric is garbage, but we have a script that runs these tracks when people are on the window or when they're idle and we only count the times in which they're still on the window and they're breathing and they're moving their mouse and all of the other cool stuff we can figure out. Again, a real metric for time is something I think everybody needs to think about if they're interested in measuring content engagement, and it's not a metric that you have just because you have Google Analytics. There's a lot of flaws with what is available in Google Analytics natively.

Then the other one is you've got to figure out where they are on the page because screen sizes are so different and devices are so different. You don't know what they're

looking at and the first answer to that is usually trying to track scroll depth in some way but even then, that requires a lot of mental gymnastics because no one wants to hear, "Here's the number of people who made it a quarter way down the page. Here's the number of people who made it halfway down the page." I had an editor stop me and say, "Aaron, no one cares if someone read halfway through this article."

**Rebekah:** [laughs]

**Aaron:** I took that to heart and said, "Okay, I'm only going to tell you the percentage of people who reached the end and you can extrapolate the rest." Those are the two metrics that we use personally in-house. It's like an honest time metric and then a scroll metric that has been refined to be— Dana and I have talked about this before. I actually used a calculated metric for this because I need to see this as a percentage of pageviews. Measuring it as an event is key but taking it out of the event space and into the pageview space is also key and the way you do that is with a custom metric.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely.

**Chris:** You guys have solutions to identifying an honest metric in terms of time on a page or going down on a page is also so important for SEO. Most people in SEO believe that Google is using some user experience metrics to monitor behavior, to see if people are actually getting value out of the content that they send people to. Something like somebody clicks from a search result in Google, let's say they don't find what they want and they go back to Google to find a better answer. This would be a clear signal to people, to search engines, that people aren't getting value out of the content and if you have more honest metrics to show what's really happening when people come in, and if they're going off and deeper into the site, or they're returning right back to Google, it definitely tips us off to do some work that we need to prioritize.

**Aaron:** I also want to back up with what you said earlier about like, percentage of—or increasing the percentage of organic search pageviews or whatever. I've heard that one before too. It's hard to— On the one hand, when I'm trying to work with people and figuring out what their goals are for their organization, I hesitate to poopoo on that one, because I know people really want to see that increase, but I try to always tell them that "You get the good with the bad," and what you're saying is exactly true. If you increase your traffic from search, you just have to understand that you're probably increasing more of the bad than you are the good.

The only way you know that is by measuring engagement of that traffic. If you get an influx of search traffic but then they all just go away after 10 seconds or they don't do what you wanted them to do and if you're not measuring engagement, you might not know that it's just garbage. It's a waste of your time.

**Rebekah:** Yes, absolutely. As a follow-up question to that and making sure you're tracking the right metrics, someone asked, "How do you balance adding tracking with using custom dimensions and different GA features to tell a story with data? We could

add tracking to every button link or feature from the site, but how do we make sure that we're using our analytics resources efficiently?"

**Dana:** Well, boy, let me tell you a lot of feelings about custom dimensions. [chuckles] I think that you have to justify why you're adding that in the first place and know what you're going to measure with it. For example, one of the custom dimensions in our standard set is navigation. How did someone get there? Did they use the back button, the forward button, did they reload the page? We use that to tell if somebody's holding a tab, or if in Chris's example, somebody hit the back button to go back to Google and then they hit the forward button to come back in your homepage, maybe they actually did go back to get to your site, for example. That's a useful metric, but not for every client. It's not a blanket thing we apply to everybody, because not everybody needs that.

Another custom dimension, for example, that not every client needs, is we look at the number of tabs that people have open with your site in it. Then how many tabs in general they have open and record this information. FYI, we can track that, and we are tracking that if you come to look at my website. One of the things that I really like about it is that it tells me a lot of people will keep multiple tabs open all the time. I saw a conversation in Slack about tab hoarders, you people are ruining the internet. If you want to know why, you have to watch my presentation.

One of the things that tab [unintelligible 00:41:32] it's that what happens is people will right-click, open a new tab, right-click, open a new tab constantly. Then it breaks the linear path. Google Analytics assumes that everybody takes when they're going through the website for clicking through eight different tabs. I think that that's something where if you think that's why people are using your site, that's where adding something like recording the number of tabs people have open, recording how they got to that tab, would be a really useful thing for you. If you have a site with three pages, don't bother, that's not the point.

I think that that's where it's a lot of context. Don't just take that you should do this or everybody should do this. Do not, it is specific to your situation. Really, think about, what do you expect? What action do you expect to take as a result of that data? Then that'll help you figure out if you're actually recording the right thing or not.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely, it's so key. Really, we get a lot of questions that I'm seeing some questions, and we can't get to all of them, but we're trying to get as many as we can about what are the right metrics to measure? What are the key things I need to keep track of? The right answer so often was, it's contextual. It depends on what your goals are, and what your users' goals are, and what your site is actually built to do. Starting out by mapping out what are those goals that you have, what is your user's intention, and mapping the metrics that you're using to track and measure success back to that is really the only approach. Would you guys add anything to that?

**Dana:** I would say that honestly, I did cover this in my presentation, is what to choose for metrics. Not to quote my presentation 18 times, but you should watch it if you're having trouble choosing because I think it will help you. [chuckles]

**Rebekah:** Watch it.

**Dana:** Sorry, go ahead, Aaron.

**Rebekah:** Watch it. [chuckles]

**Aaron:** I was going to say that finding the intersect between an organization's goals and a user's intention or behavior is really the name of the game here. There's honestly, Google Analytics and other similar tools that are a chalkboard, they're a playground for you to put these pieces together. There's never one right answer but I would say that the more you can do working with yourself with your team, your organization, and trying to map out what it is the organization is trying to do and achieve, and then mapping that all the way through, "Okay, what will the user do so that I know that we've been successful?" that is a long journey sometimes.

People, especially in higher ed—and that's just the industry I've been in—in higher ed, it's always like, "Well, we want to be the preeminent research institution in the Midwest or something." Institutions will have these impossible goals. I'm like, "Okay, well, what does that mean to you? What do you want users to do when they get to your site?" It's usually, I want them to click something, I want to know what their name is, or I want them to have read X amount of material. Luckily, I think that almost all of the time, we can extrapolate what a measured user behavior should look like when trying to fit it under an institutional objective.

**Dana:** I think there's value too in taking those kinds of goals that are actually goals, to be the preeminent researcher's institution, and really think of them as more aspirations, because there's no way you can measure that. How are you going to know when you get there? It's not a goal. That's a funny warm feeling that you put in the report because you want people to give you money. That's fine, but it's not actually going to help you measure your web content at all. I think definitely separate the two. There's a place where you can include links after this. I think you mentioned that at the beginning.

**Rebekah:** In Slack. Yes. We'll be sharing any- [crosstalk]

**Dana:** Yes, in Slack. I'll toss this in. It's a talk I gave back in 2015, I think, or 2014, at MozCon, and it was called "Prove Your Value." I talked about choosing good goals versus bad goals and what you can do for your organization. It's funny because I gave that talk so many years ago, but it's still 100% relevant today. **[unintelligible 00:45:41]** for the separate the wheat from the chaff when it comes to goal setting.

**Aaron:** I think that's a Madonna song I used to really rock out to, "bad girls drunk by six."

[laughter]

**Chris:** Love it.

**Rebekah:** I like it.

**Aaron:** Aaron will also be sending out a Spotify playlist after this too.

**Rebekah:** Check in Slack for that. In Slack, we'll have those links to Dana's **[unintelligible 00:46:04]** on what metrics you should be looking at and how to determine which ones you're going to use, and playlists from there. Okay. To change direction just slightly, but I think it's an important question. Kelly, Steve, and David asked, "How do you **[unintelligible 00:46:26]** versus **[inaudible 00:46:27]** and how much does optimizing for technical SEO really move the needle? Let's assume that you're publishing quality content." I think she's hitting on something really important that gets overlooked a lot, that there is a nuance to how you approach SEO. Anyway, what do you guys think? Does anyone want to go first on this one?

**Dana:** I think I'd go and start on that one.

**Rebekah:** Yes, that's good.

**Chris:** All right, sounds good. SEO covers so much ground and it can get confusing to understand what's most important. I think a lot of people have a misconception that it's just one or the other, that you can just make rad content and everyone's going to come and not have to worry about anything technical, or that most of SEO is all technical. I'm not going to allow you to make recommendations around changing the site navigation or information architecture or things like that. The truth is, it all does matter. There is a big part of SEO that is technical, call it, I don't know, 40% or something.

There's obviously some big roadblocks that could happen, where no matter how great your content is and how helpful your website is, if it has something that's blocking a crawler from accessing it, then there's no chance it could ever rank. I really find it's a blend of those things. When you're auditing to find out opportunities, you really need to be looking at things from all of those angles and prioritizing technical things within the mix of other user experience design decisions and content as well.

**Rebekah:** Another thing to add to that too—oh, go ahead. [crosstalk]

**Dana:** No, you can go ahead.

**Aaron:** Is that me? No? Okay, I'll go first and then you. To add to this, I think that the question was about SEO and technical SEO. I wanted to just throw in that there's a technical side to Google Analytics as well, obviously, to any kind of analytics ecosystem; you have to be able to trust the data. As content strategists, we're not always the most tech. We're tech-savvy people, but we're not, maybe, developers. I think that there's this tendency to feel like, "Well, that is not in my realm. That is in some other realm." The truth is that if you care about the quality of your content, you should also care about the quality of these technical underpinnings for SEO and for analytics.

You don't have to be an expert or a web developer to run certain tools to make sure that everything is set up correctly. You don't have to have any technical expertise to ask the right questions if this is in fact, not your responsibility. I think that it's good for everyone to understand how this all works. How does the tracking pixel work? What role does the cookie play? The same goes for SEO too. What happens when these meta descriptions are wrong or I'm duplicating tags or I'm doing such and such? There are serious implications when you don't have something just the right way in the code.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely. Even how a site is built or the CMS comes together can dictate what's possible, not just for content editors. Knowing how the CMS is going to match back to our actual content module. Not only is that important for content editors and governance, it's really important for what's possible in SEO. A lot of times, if page templates are built too rigidly or the CMS is too locked down or really clunky, you're not able to do some of the optimization that you need to and it can cause a lot of problems for organic visibility. To answer your question, how important is technical SEO, it's just as important as the stuff that you're doing on the front end when it comes to optimizing content. Dana, did you have something you wanted to add to that?

**Dana:** I was just thinking about all the bad WordPress installations I've seen in my life. I think that one of the things is that they all just think that your website is technically bad for SEO just because it's on a certain platform. You can have great SEO with a WordPress website but it has a completely custom template, and you can have terrible SEO with a WordPress site that is using some theme you bought off the internet using a page builder like Elementor, which is the worst. I think that there's different ranges that you can put in there. Definitely, we've seen when you fix technical SEO, things get better 100% of the time. There's never been a negative impact from fixing technical SEO issues. Chris?

**Chris:** I was just going to add, too, something that comes to mind. Sometimes technical SEO, it can be in this category of removing obstacles and making sure your infrastructure is easily accessible to search engines, but it can also help piggyback off of that great content you're building, too. Something like structured data can help communicate to search engines what your subject matter is actually about, too.

There's structured data for different industries and different topics that can get really ultra-specific. If you were a bank, there's markup for banks, there's markup for a lot of different industries and healthcare and so on. Sometimes extending your great content to some markup can also help pass meaning to search engines just like you are doing to users, too.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely.

**Dana:** Sorry about that. The plug fell on my laptop at the beginning of this and my laptop was going to die if I didn't grab it. Now, I'm back. [laughs]

**Chris:** Nice try.

**Rebekah:** We're talking a lot about SEO, you guys. Molly is asking "How much has SEO shaped content strategy? Meaning, choosing what pages to build, how to fill out the site structure, the information architecture, versus applying SEO afterwards when you've already decided what content you create." Chris, you want to kick this one off?

**Chris:** Yes, sure. We find it just absolutely essential that research intent—research is done at the same time, along in the same process as the rest of the website. Let's say you were starting from scratch and redesigning something that— Search intent is done in parallel with other qualitative forms of research like user interviews or customer journey mapping, in that you're using all of those considerations at the same time to inform design.

It can be so dangerous to make something and then have to come back to it years later for some changes. Once something gets set in stone and in concrete, it's really hard to change later. We see search intent as just another form of user research. They're user needs just like other user needs you can uncover through interviews and things like that, just from a different source.

**Rebekah:** I don't know if any of you saw the interview with Sarah Richards yesterday who writes about content design. She mentioned how she always starts with journey mapping and understanding the user's journey. It's interesting because studying search data and search intent can actually be mapped back to the user's journey, can help us understand what are people looking for when they're first researching something or trying to determine what the problem is, versus towards the end when they're honing in on a solution or a purchase or whatever that is depending on your organization and your goals.

Understanding that SEO isn't just something that comes in at the end, because it's really not just about optimizing for keywords, it's about understanding how people search, using that data to shape the content, to shape the IA. That way, when it's happening in tandem like that, it's really human-centered content design with that layer of search data that helps to align the user journey to the search journey as well. Dana, you had a point you wanted to add in there?

**Dana:** Yes. I also start measurement projects with user journeys as well, because the other thing that I want to say to people is remember, not every touch point on that journey is going to be on your website or on a property that you control. One of the things that I'll ask clients, particularly as structured snippets and answer boxes become more popular on Google, thinking about, can someone answer their query without ever actually going to your website, but also while still engaging with your content in some way. If you are completely gone from the search engine results when it comes to things like answer boxes, you are just not there, so don't fight it.

**[unintelligible 00:55:34]** did a great study actually about answer boxes. They on purpose got rid of one of theirs. I think that their traffic went down something like 15% and then they couldn't get it back afterwards. Definitely, answer boxes. They're great. You should look into them. Aaron, you had something to say, too?

**Aaron:** Yes. Because sometimes getting the answer to their question outside of your site will prevent them from even coming to your site. Sometimes, that's okay. If you have answered their question before you got there, you probably didn't want that traffic anyway because it was a flyby. We have it all the time on our site. They're like, "I'm just checking in to see how big Harvard's endowment is today." Like, "Okay, here's the number. Bye. Go on with your day."

**Dana:** I've started a local search way back when. Local search, we haven't had people come to our websites in forever because the websites, especially restaurant websites, they're trash. These people use Flash, they have tinkly music, you couldn't find the menu, you had to download a PDF. They did this to themselves. That's why Google doesn't send people to local websites anymore.

Realistically, I don't actually give a crap how you end up contacting the business, I just want you to contact them. If that's the phone number or visiting, it doesn't matter. I think that's where B2B websites and large organizations are just getting caught up to the reality that's been on local search for years, which is people probably aren't going to go to your website because it's probably kind of crappy, but even if it is spectacular, people have been conditioned to think that it's crappy so they're still not going to go. Anything you can do to show that you have the information to build that brand equity essentially through search results without them coming to your website will be a good thing in the end, for sure.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely. Guys, we're down to the wire here. We have a couple of minutes left again. I know from doing work with clients that sometimes getting the resources to do any of this is really hard. Whether it's getting resources to get a new tool or to bring in a consultant if it's a really hairy problem. Really quickly, do you want to just speak to, what are the most important things people could do to get the buy-in they need to be doing this kind of work and get their resources to pull it off?

**Dana:** Who wants to start? Aaron? No? Chris?

**Chris:** I could start. I feel like from an SEO perspective, there's just so many misconceptions. It can be super helpful in the beginning of working with somebody just to try to educate them on what modern SEO really is and that it's not just a technical thing. Setting those expectations that someone has to be willing to work on information architecture, their navigation, key messaging on their homepage, and be willing to make additional pages in the site, in addition to technical things, is really valuable because it sets things up later for us to talk about all of those different subject matters.

It also allows us to get resources from people in different departments. Yes, we'll need a developer, but we'll also need access to a user experience designer and someone on the content team. Suddenly, we're able to better collaborate with them and get their resources.

**Dana:** I would add to that, too. Think about the psychology of the person you need to convince that they need to give you money or resources or whatever is it you need and

think about what's going to appeal to them. Are they mad at this competitor because they always beat them, are they really motivated by money? That could be donations, for example, if you're not for profit or capitalism, if you're a commercial business. Really think about what it is that's going to move the needle for leadership and then how can you tilt everything you ask for towards moving that needle.

**Rebekah:** Absolutely.

**Chris:** That's great.

**Rebekah:** Guys, that was a lot of stuff. Thank you so much. Then with one parting thought there, back to that question of what comes first, SEO or content strategy, obviously, it all starts with understanding your user needs and your business goals and balancing those. SEO is just a part of that, and SEO isn't at odds with user experience. In fact, a lot of the things we do for user experience, we should be doing for modern search too. It really should be working together, not opposing forces.

Guys, thanks for joining us for that conversation. Thanks, Dana, and Aaron, and Chris for sharing all of your expertise. I learned a lot. [chuckles]

**Chris:** Thanks for having me.

**Dana:** [chuckles] I did, too. I totally have something to do now. Thanks, Aaron. [laughter]

**Aaron:** Thank you. Me too. [inaudible 01:00:02], guys.

**Rebekah:** Right. We're going to try and get to some of the questions that we didn't have time to answer here over Slack. We will be posting links to any of the tools, and talks, and other resources that we mentioned to you. Feel free to reach out to us if you have any other questions, guys. Thank you so much.

**Dana:** Thank you.

**Aaron:** Thank you.

**Host:** Thank you so much. That was amazing. Thank you too for offering to answer some more questions. I think you're doing the speaker Q&A section? Is that right? It's for your Q&A channel?

**Rebekah:** Yes.

**Host:** Awesome. I will be there. I will be following. Although I will say all I do now is read Slack. That is literally all I do in between breaks. Rebekah, thank you so much for being here. You did a fantastic job hosting that panel. You are important to Confab, so we really appreciate you. Have a great rest of the day. We'll see you on Slack.

**Rebekah:** Yes, thanks. Bye, guys.

**Host:** Okay, bye-bye.

[music]

**[01:01:06] [END OF AUDIO]**