GDEVS - [SOTR068] SEARCH OFF THE RECORD - 68TH EPISODE - VIDEO

[00:00:11:17] - **John**
Hello and welcome to another episode of Search Off the Record, a podcast coming to you from the Google Search team discussing all things search and maybe having some fun along the way. My name is John and I'm joined today by Lizzie and Gary from the Search Relations team of which I'm also a part of. Hi, Lizzie.

[00:00:33:00] - **Lizzi**
Hi, John. Happy New Year.

[00:00:34:28] - **John**
Hi, Gary.

[00:00:35:26] - **Gary**
Hello.

[00:00:36:26] - **John**
Happy New Year.

[00:00:38:02] - **Lizzi**
So John, tell us why have you gathered us here today in person on the most cold day of the year thus far?

[00:00:46:19] - **John**
Well, it can still get colder. So we'll see.

[00:00:51:11] - **Lizzi**
That's why I said this far, you know, precision.

[00:00:54:22] - **Gary**
How does that work?

[00:00:55:20] - **Lizzi**
Exactly. Precise wording.

[00:00:58:20] - **John**
So I heard you two were working on the SEO Starter Guide and I figured like for a search podcast, we could talk about SEOs. What do you think?

[00:01:10:27] - **Gary**
Do we have to talk about CEOs or the SEO Starter Guide?

[00:01:13:20] - **John**
SEO Starter Guide.

[00:01:16:24] - **Gary**
Ok. That sounds good. What would you like to know?

[00:01:20:03] - **Lizzi**
Maybe the first question is, is the SEO Starter Guide for CEOs?

[00:01:23:19] - **John**
Is it, wait? No, it's like before they become...

[00:01:28:28] - **Lizzi**
It's like a precursor.

[00:01:30:14] - **John**
Okay. You shouldn't be asking me questions. I should be asking you questions because you're working on the SEO Starter Guide. I'm just like, what are these people doing? So, first of all, I heard on social media that SEO is dead and if SEO is dead, why are we even spending time on this SEO Starter Guide? Do people even look at this?

[00:01:53:08] - **Lizzi**
You know, it is our top viewed guide after the home page and I think that page that we have, it's like a landing page for the old structure data testing tool. This is the third most viewed page which is interesting to me because I would have thought maybe like people read

[00:02:09:23] - **Lizzi**
it and then they move on and since SEO has been a thing for how many years, how many people are still starting a fresh?

[00:02:17:23] - **John**
Wow. OK. So you're saying we did a lot of good SEO for the SEO Starter Guide? No?

[00:02:23:28] - **Lizzi**
I don't know if we could say that part.

[00:02:26:07] - **John**
Or more that, that people are just looking for it?

[00:02:29:03] - **Lizzi**
It's currently appearing when you search for SEO. Yes. Yes. Search for SEO right now. Well, I mean, I don't know if it matters if you're logged in or not, but if you search for SEO, is it one of the top few results?

[00:02:43:23] - **John**
OK. Well, I didn't actually check.

[00:02:46:14] - **Lizzi**
He's checking, he's looking. He has a device, he can look live.

[00:02:49:27] - **John**
Gary.

[00:02:51:03] - **Gary**
Search engine optimization starter guide.

[00:02:53:08] - **Lizzi**
Wait, what, what position?

[00:02:55:27] - **Gary**
So for me, I see Mailchimp first, then I see Search Engine Land and then developers at google.com/search. Interesting.

[00:03:05:20] - **Lizzi**
I think that we've been holding that position since the migration.

[00:03:09:22] - **Gary**
Oh, wow.

[00:03:11:06] - **Lizzi**
So that's partially why I've been a little bit... Not scared. Well, maybe scared, like, that I shouldn't touch it because it's doing well. So it has a very high satisfaction rating for the thumbs up. Like is this helpful or not? Our baseline is 75% and this document has a 91% positive rating. So people like it, it's the top viewed page. It's ranking well. One might say, don't touch a thing that's going well.

[00:03:40:02] - **John**
But, but you say...

[00:03:41:17] - **Lizzi**
I would like to cause chaos.

[00:03:43:04] - **John**
You're kind of like, well, lots of people are looking at it. Therefore, we should make sure it's even better.

[00:03:47:23] - **Lizzi**
Yes, I think that that would be the... yes, the alternative, I think be careful as you proceed to not get rid of the things that people like about it while still updating it to be current, present day. And also to take into account all of the other things that we have on the Search Central website. Because this is still like a holdover task since we did the migration of bringing all the stuff together into one home. We had like seven or eight different get started like Search for Beginners, Basics of Search, SEO Starter Guide, Get Started for Developers. All of these different intro materials that were living in all of these different homes that we had scattered about. And I don't think that we need that many now that we're in one house. It might make sense if you had separate websites, but now that we're in one place we don't really need that many.

[00:04:39:13] - **John**
So, it's kind of like we're cleaning up, cannibalization in the search results.

[00:04:44:05] - **Gary**
Cannibaliza... Oh my God.

[00:04:46:07] - **John**
Oh, we're canonicalizing the cannibalization. I don't know like, OK, this sounds good. Cool.

[00:04:54:07] - **Lizzi**
Well, it's, I think from my perspective it's more of a maintenance thing, I guess. Like, I don't want to have 10 different places where we're doing... like saying the same thing in varying ways. So if we need to go make an update about some topic, I just have to go to one place to make that update instead of 20 different places where we're saying it slightly differently.

[00:05:15:03] - **John**
Ok. What effect do you think it'll have? Will it rank better or is the ranking not your primary objective?

[00:05:22:00] - **Lizzi**
I think it's not my primary objective, but I'm hoping that it doesn't fall off the wayside with like nobody looking at it anymore. That would be, I think, bad. What do you think, Gary?

[00:05:34:04] - **Gary**
I mean, it will probably fall in rankings because we are also cutting a lot of text that people might be searching for mostly because we are trying to make the doc tighter and get rid of stuff that is less important nowadays to focus on right from the beginning at least. I think we removed stuff about HTTPS for example, if I remember correctly. And it's not that it's not important. It's just you are very likely already have an HTTPS site out of the box when you set up your domain because you can get an HTTPS certificate for free very easily or mobile friendliness is also something that is pretty much out of the box nowadays, when you get a template. So it's not something that you have to focus on. And then that's probably good for a first reader because then it's less overwhelming. I don't remember the word count but I know that we cut it back quite a bit. Maybe, you know, Lizzie.

[00:06:38:01] - **Lizzi**
Yes, at least more than half. So I think the current word count is around 8000... 4, 500. And our current draft that we have right now is around the 3000 mark. So we did cut out at least half because there's a lot of duplication where we're explaining what is the title and like the best practices for improving titles and descriptions where we have like full on guide that we've now improved since the SEO Starter Guide was initially written. So it was like a one-stop shop, but now we have more extensive things on all of these topics. So I think part of it is like, why do we need to have it in two places?

[00:07:15:07] - **John**
So I think I need to get one question out of the way. Are you saying Google looks at the word count?

[00:07:22:21] - **Lizzi**
It does sound like that's what you're implying, that we will fall in the rankings because it's no longer 8000 words. Is that what you're saying?

[00:07:31:10] - **Gary**
That's precisely what I'm saying. Of course. No. But I mean, if you think about it, like, if you don't have those words on the page anymore, then how would you rank for them?

[00:07:39:25] - **Lizzi**
But I don't even think that we're ranking for HTTPS.

[00:07:43:14] - **Gary**
I don't know, I haven't checked.

[00:07:45:08] - **Lizzi**
We can check this, but I highly doubt that we're appearing for mobile friendly. Like, ideally the guide about mobile friendliness.

[00:07:52:08] - **John**
I think if we focus on what is useful for the users, then even if there's some ranking changes, I think that's ok. And I could imagine people might be searching for things while we say, well, this is not something we're going to cover in our SEO Starter Guide anymore. Then they go somewhere else and find information on that, which is, is perfectly fine.

[00:08:13:23] - **Lizzi**
I agree. I feel like a lot of the stuff that we're cutting out are things that are either dated or automatically baked into some CMS that a beginner type user that we're imagining, it doesn't have to worry about like, oh, whether or not my website is going to be mobile friendly. That should, I think work out of the box.

[00:08:31:20] - **John**
Ok. And, and by beginner and mobile friendly and things like

[00:08:35:29] - **John**
that, you basically mean someone who hasn't created websites before. So not someone like a web designer who wants to learn about SEO, it's really someone who's kind of like coming to the web fresh.

[00:08:48:12] - **Gary**
I mean, it could be either, right?

[00:08:49:27] - **Lizzi**
Yeah.

[00:08:50:26] - **John**
So you're going to talk about HTTPS and HTML.

[00:08:54:06] - **Lizzi**
I don't know if we... we cut that out because we decided that's not really a top concern for most people anymore.

[00:09:01:07] - **John**
OK.

[00:09:02:08] - **Lizzi**
Because it's hard to make your site not HTTPS.

[00:09:06:14] - **John**
Well, if you're a developer you can break your site in surprising ways.

[00:09:10:20] - **Gary**
But the idea is that there are all these weird things on websites that might influence search engines in specific ways. Like for example, if you have a title element that is very likely going to be used by search engines as the title link of the search result. So search engines will take the portions of the content as snippets and then present that. And those are the concepts that people should probably realize that like the different parts of the page might be used by search engines for specific purposes. And how do you control that? Like, how do you build your html? That's less important than having this concept in the back of your brain and thinking about it when you need to. Right?

[00:09:55:29] - **Lizzi**
Yeah, I think the idea is that it's not as prevalent as when this guide was initially written. Like when we first wrote this, the Webmaster Relations team initially wrote this. It was a bigger problem if I recall correctly.

[00:10:09:26] - **John**

OK. So it's more that people are not writing HTML in Notepad anymore, but rather...

[00:10:15:21] - **Gary**
Hey, I do.

[00:10:17:22] - **John**
Well, it's like the average person on the internet

[00:10:21:08] - **Lizzi**
probably is booting up Wordpress with a capital P or using

[00:10:27:23] - **John**
a CMS like Wix or Squarespace or something like that where they don't have to worry about HTML. They have a field for the title and then they put a title in, but they have to understand what is a title. And why does it matter?

[00:10:41:00] - **Gary**
I kind of like that you brought that up because we resolved a comment about that a couple of days ago where we were actually thinking about this, like how to position CMSs that actually creates the title element for you without you knowing. And basically they just ask you to provide a title for the page and then they will deal with that title in the right way air coding here, whatever right way means. But typically they would just put it in a title element, right? And then search engines would pick up the title.

[00:11:14:29] - **Lizzi**
Yeah, I think we had previously had it written in a more of a, like they might not be doing this and you should go check to see if they're doing it correctly. But then you looked up like actually it's working fine. Like this is not a thing that is something that people need to go verify that the title element is being exported correctly in the HTML at the end is not something that's like a common scenario.

[00:11:36:26] - **John**
I think we've talked about a lot of these elements so often that pretty much all CMSs have heard it before and they understand like Google talks about titles. So we will make it easy for people to do titles. So it's kind of like, I don't know, think things have moved on and probably for the average person to look at the HTML and confirm that something is in a title. It's pretty complicated nowadays with all of the frameworks that are involved.

[00:12:05:06] - **Gary**
Oh, yeah, especially if you have something like no JS for where you don't even have a on HTML.

[00:12:11:20] - **John**
Yeah. It's like all those Javascript sites that work so well on search nowadays.

[00:12:16:24] - **Lizzi**
I mean, would this be something that's covered when you are doing like the first section where it's like, check how Google sees your site and you plug in a URL, it shows a little snapshot and if you don't see your title there, that's kind of when you would realize like, hey, important parts are missing.

[00:12:31:09] - **John**
I mean, that would probably need a tool or something?

[00:12:34:02] - **Lizzi**
Is it already positioned in a way that a beginner would notice if something was wrong, let's say their CMS or like the no JS thing you were mentioning is doing something weird with the title. Would they notice that with this positioning of like, hey, first step, go check to see how Google sees your site, they pasted into... I don't know, Rich Result Test or Inspection Tool to see the snapshot. Would you notice that, hey, like the title is not there? Like it's just a blank page.

[00:12:59:21] - **John**
Well, I guess you would see if it's a blank page. I don't know how the title is shown in those tests, but as soon as you search for your site with like a site colon query or for the name, you see it pretty quickly what the title is

[00:13:15:04] - **Lizzi**
Yeah. So if there is something funky that you need to talk to your developer about, that's like a weird situation, then you would notice that in the first step of that guide.

[00:13:25:01] - **Gary**
Yeah, hopefully.

[00:13:26:04] - **John**
Cool. Another thing I I've heard from people about the SEO starter guide is that there's not a lot of detail in it and it would help people to be like, very exact, like, can't you make an exact html page that they can just copy and reuse that does all of the SEO correctly? Do you think that would make sense? Like some, like you should make your pages look exactly like this to be optimal for SEO.

[00:13:55:01] - **Gary**
I mean, but that's not how it works.

[00:13:57:20] - **John**
What do you mean that's not how it works? Wouldn't it be easier if all of the pages look the same then Google could just look at the same page?

[00:14:04:15] - **Gary**
Well, that would make a very boring internet. So that would be one issue. The second issue is that I know that some people like to think that HTML structure matters all so much for rankings, but in fact, it doesn't matter that much. Using headings and a good title element and having paragraphs, yeah, sure. It's all great. But other than that, I would think it's pretty futile to think about how the page... or how the HTML is structured, providing a template that works for any website that seems like an oxymoron to me.

[00:14:37:02] - **Lizzi**
When you say template, do you mean the content too? Or just the fact that it would be like H1 and then like some paragraph and then H2 and then more paragraph or are you saying like an outline? Like, ok, the thing, there's an intro and then what you're going to expect from this thing and there's a conclusion at the end, like a five paragraph essay for college.

[00:14:55:19] - **John**
Yeah. Well, I mean, either of those, I mean, it's like I'm not saying we should do that. It's just something that I've heard online that people say, well, Google has this SEO Starter Guide, but it's so vague. It doesn't tell me exactly what I need to do. And from what Gary says it's like it sounds like, oh, it doesn't need to be exact because one does something different is that kind of the direction you'd go as well, or would you say, like, maybe Google should have some exact guidance on what a page should look like.

[00:15:25:18] - **Lizzi**
I mean, we have a section in there about creating unique content. So to have everything being the same is like it's not very interesting.

[00:15:32:21] - **John**
OK.

[00:15:33:13] - **Gary**
Yeah, I don't know how that would work. I'm trying to think about how would we be able to provide some sort of template that people can reuse? And I just can't wrap my head around it for some reason.

[00:15:45:08] - **Lizzi**
OK, I have a real example. So from our own website, Onsie, we have a structure for all of the structure data docs that are templatized where it's like the first paragraph is always explaining what the feature is. There's a picture of what that rich result looks like. Guidelines. There's the table. It feels very familiar. I mean, we're doing it for our users who are working in the structure data space so that they're familiar with things. So it's helpful I think in certain cases, API documentation when you're looking for something you are in a familiar area where this thing is always here and it makes it easier for you to find the things that you're looking for, but it's for a specific use case I think could work.

[00:16:25:22] - **John**
OK. So, so basically every website has to understand their use cases and make their own templates. It might be helpful for their users depending on what type of content is.] OK. So I can't take your structure data docs and use them for my cheese collection. It probably wouldn't make much sense.

[00:16:44:00] - **Lizzi**
Like to categorize your types of cheese in alphabetical order?

[00:16:48:10] - **John**
Alphabetical order. Cool. And like it always feels like there are topics that Google doesn't want to touch that much or talk about too much. Like I don't know, choosing your domain name where it's like, well, Google should just tell us if we should put keywords in our domain or not. And I always kind of struggle with this because when people ask me, like, how should I pick a domain name is like, do whatever you want. But would we talk about something like that in the SEO Starter Guide?

[00:17:17:22] - **John**
Because like, people will have the question, what do we tell them?

[00:17:20:27] - **Gary**
So this is something that we certainly want to explore and we might be able to launch it with the first version or first updated version where we try to touch on exactly the these things like does the domain name matter? I think ultimately it does boil down to do whatever you want, but it is slightly more nuanced and sometimes we can talk about those nuances. So when you are buying a domain name, then you are... you have to think about the brand that you are trying to establish or that you already established and you want to site for. And then you might also think that because you heard from someone that the domain name actually plays some role in the ranking of the site. And then you would think from that angle as well. So you might want to put some keywords in the domain name, maybe it will help making the domain name probably very ugly. But then maybe we can say that whatever you put in the URLs including the domain name has so little effect on your rankings that it might not be worth thinking about it. And you should perhaps think more about how your users perceive your pages or site based on the URL and domain name. That's a very long winded way to say that we probably can say more, but it's nuanced.

[00:18:43:11] - **Lizzi**
Like it's better than saying nothing. We don't mention it at all right now, but it does seem like that that should be something that we talk about because you either have something that you're like, I don't know if this domain name is good. Like should I change it? It's like very generic. I don't know. Like I'm imagining the users who are coming to read this document most likely have a site that they're trying to improve. And if you're considering whether or not should you move to a new domain because it's so bad is probably like Gary said, unless you have a really terrible domain, it's not worth it to move to a new one, but we should at least cover it.

[00:19:19:18] - **John**
So kind of like these are a set of best practices that you should follow with regards to things like titles and maybe headings and other things. Well, I was like, depends on what you care about with regards to your business, your users and maybe we should mention some of those as well.

[00:19:35:01] - **Lizzi**
Yeah, because it depends on your business use case in the industry that you're in, the thing that you have if you're picking a new thing, but something I think we should address it and we're still in active discussions about how to position it and how like high up in the guide should that be? Is this something that's like lower down as like a note or is this something earlier that should be mentioning?

[00:20:00:26] - **John**
What do you think about things that basically don't play a role at all? Like meta keywords, at least as far as I know, they don't play a role in Google Search.

[00:20:11:22] - **Gary**
Don't we already say that on the metatags doc?

[00:20:15:03] - **John**
So would we basically not talk about them at all in the SEO Starter Guide or would we say like if you're thinking about meta tags, look at the stock and only use the ones that we say.

[00:20:26:27] - **Gary**
But I mean, like site owners can use whatever metatags they want. Like it doesn't really matter. It's just usually the problem is that they are expecting something from the meta to perform some magic with search engines and usually those meal don't exist or they don't do anything. And including meta keywords. I think Google never actually use meta keywords. I will bet a banana that we never will. I feel very conflicted about documenting anti patterns because we perhaps also give ideas about like new worries for site owners to think about. I mean, you've done myth busting presentations in the past. One of the things in our myth busting presentation is that using any other Google product will not influence your ranking in Google Search.

[00:21:10:05] - **Lizzi**
But the anti pattern thing, it's imagining what our users already know. And should we address that? Like, hey, they might have heard this or read this thing before. And so we should tell them like, hey, actually you don't need to do that or by absence of information. Is that enough? Because like Gary said, introducing a worry or like, oh, don't do this. They're like, wait, I never even thought about doing that. Like, what is this thing now? I have to like go look into like, what is a meta... like, I don't even know what a meta tag is. I think we don't actually talk about any other meta tags other than meta description. So it's almost like a concept that we're not like, oh, just go add a bunch of meat tags to your site. That's not something that we're even going into right now in the SEO Starter Guide because that's like a secondary, like phase two.

[00:21:55:17] - **John**
Yeah. Ok. I think that that makes sense to me at least because it's also kind of that aspect of like if we say, oh, you don't need to use meta tags because they have no effect. And people are like, why is Google telling us not to use these meta keywords?

[00:22:10:19] - **Lizzi**
Yeah.

[00:22:11:17] - **John**
Surely there's a secret reason why they're trying to hoard these keywords to themselves and...

[00:22:19:27] - **Lizzi**
Or by not mentioning it like, oh, this is the secret to everything. It's a conspiracy about why it's not there. Let me go look into it.

[00:22:26:27] - **John**
OK.

[00:22:27:15] - **John**
Maybe I shouldn't have brought up this topic in that case. I'm sorry, like all of the listeners should just kind of like blur out the last 10 minutes.

[00:22:34:28] - **Lizzi**
Block it out of your memory.

[00:22:37:08] - **John**
We did not talk about meta keywords. Don't worry, no meta keywords were harmed.

[00:22:41:24] - **Gary**
I just thought of something else for anti patterns. Like if you think from chaos theory perspective because that's the easiest thing that I can come up with right now, then technically anything will affect your rankings like a butterfly flaps its wings outside the train station and tomorrow your rankings will fall because of a series of cascading effects. So, does that mean that we should document that the moon and the butterflies affect your rankings indirectly?

[00:23:12:15] - **Lizzi**
Seasonality.

[00:23:13:18] - **Gary**
Seasonality. Sure.

[00:23:15:09] - **Lizzi**
Sure. Like the moon. I don't know.

[00:23:17:13] - **John**
Ok. I think we should try to document things that have more of an objective effect than butterflies.

[00:23:24:06] - **Gary**
Chaos theory is as objective as it gets.

[00:23:27:06] - **John**

Oh, my gosh. Like from my point of view, I would like to think a lot of things in search are a little bit less than chaos theory. But it's like...

[00:23:37:12] - **Gary**
When was the last you had a website?

[00:23:40:07] - **John**
Philosophically, you know, it's like everything can kind of play it. Ok. Maybe we should just focus on the things that are more direct.

[00:23:48:19] - **Lizzi**
We do get asked a lot about this kind of stuff. And sometimes like, no, sure. Now we're going to get asked a lot about butterflies.

[00:23:56:00] - **John**
Cool. Ok. Well, I'm looking forward to seeing how the SEO Starter Guide ends up and maybe it'll be live by the time this episode comes out. I don't know. We'll see.

[00:24:07:08] - **Lizzi**
That's the idea.

[00:24:08:11] - **John**
Oh, wow.

[00:24:09:08] - **Lizzi**
Pressure us.

[00:24:10:07] - **John**
OK. Well, now we have time pressure. Cool. OK. Well, that's it for this episode. Thank you for joining us here. **Lizzie** and Gary. It's always fascinating to hear what's happening on the Google Search Relations team, especially since I'm supposed to be the manager. And thank you all for listening in and for subscribing to our podcast. I hope you like it. Make sure to leave us comments if there's something that you would like to see differently or if you kind of really enjoy, let us know what you think and we'll get back to you. Well, I guess with another episode of Search Off The Record. Thank you and goodbye.

[00:24:50:00] - **Lizzi**
Bye.

[00:24:50:21] - **Gary**
Goodbye.

[00:24:56:16] - **John**
We've been having fun with these podcast episodes. I hope you, the listener have been finding them both entertaining and insightful as well. Feel free to drop me a note on Twitter or chat with us at one of the next events that we go to if you have any thoughts and of course, don't forget to like and subscribe. Thank you and goodbye.