5 Proven Methods For
Improving On-Search Effectiveness

Tim:
Well, hi Steve, how are you?

Steve:
I'm doing very well, Tim as usual, right? You know, as usual. Yes, couldn't to be sad about it. I know we sometimes look behind the scenes here, we don't always talk about the season, right? But I did notice this morning that summer is over and some leaves are starting to fall, which it feels a little early for that. But the other harbinger of the season is last night I was grinding through our planning process, our budget sheet for next year, thinking about expenses aligning with investments, some of the exciting stuff that we're going to announce probably at MarTech next spring, probably in like April or May timeframe, so really excited about that. And of course I know all of our customers and the people who would like to be our customers are also going through their planning process, thinking about what they're going to invest in next year. So hopefully today we'll talk about something that maybe they'll invest in, in the coming year.

Tim:
I like that a lot, Steve, I think that's a really good idea. So as the leaves fall, we need to see things fall on your budget line towards...

Steve:
Indeed, I like the metaphor.

Tim:
Towards SoloSegment. Well, we do what we can, one tries. So, the last time we spoke, we were really talking about the mistakes people make and the errors we see in the way people approach site search and things like that. And I think we teased folks, teased in the sense of teased what we were going to talk about next, not make fun of, but we teased the idea that we were going to talk about. What do you do instead? Right. So Steve, what do you do instead?

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Steve:
All right, well, let's start by recapping. I know not everybody, is probably current on their podcast listening, so let's just throw in a little bit of a recap. So we talked about the reason search fails, right? And there are basically four reasons. The first is, too much focus on technology. Search is not just about the technology delivers search results, it's also about things like content, and of course governance, there's lots of other stuff. So technology, yep, important, big part of the play, but lots of other things to consider as well. The second is measuring the wrong things and the wrong things are things like, "Did somebody click on a search result?" And then celebrating that result, right? Because the real result is did somebody find what they're looking for?

Tim:
Right.

Steve:
Did they progress on a journey downstream? The third is too much reliance on people and too little automation. One of the complaints that I hear again and again, and honestly it's whether they folks have a technology that is really elegant or a technology that is hard to manage, no matter what technology you have, you always have too few people to manage it. So can use automation to rely less upon the people.

Tim:
Right.

Steve:
And then the fourth thing is the fact that, like I said, it's technology, it's content. There are a lot of things that contribute to effective search and it really is team sport. So not enough engagement, not enough participation by all the stakeholders at the table because it really is a team sport. So that's just a quick recap of the four reasons that people sometimes people struggle to get search working well.

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Tim:
So if they're facing one or more of these four reasons, if folks who are listening are facing one or more of these four reasons, what are the, oh, I don't know, four, maybe five things that they could do.

Steve:
5? Let's go with 5.

Tim:
Five let's go with five. So hit me with number one, Steve what's number one?

Steve:
So number one, kind of coming off that last point I made, which was about governance and stakeholder participation, it really is about preparing the team. If you do not have the team aligned to make search successful, you're going to struggle. And so it starts with, I think IT because search is often owned by IT. Sometimes it starts with maybe the digital marketing folks, maybe they own the search technology, but regardless of where you start, those are the two big stakeholders. So ensuring that marketing team and the IT organization are aligned is important. And by aligned, I mean, first and foremost that you talk to one another, right?

Tim:
Right, right.

Steve:
That you have some forum where you could have a chat on a regular basis. And by that, I mean more than just sending emails to one another, but you actually get together.

Tim:
Or, pitching things over the fence and being like, "your problem now?"

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Steve:
Yeah, yeah. No, lots of companies have those sorts of relationships. But really bringing that sense of partnership to the marketing and the technology teams working together. The third leg of that stool though, is really out in the business units. And a lot of companies that we work with and even smaller companies they do have these people all scatter all over the business who are contributing to great search and in the business units, the product teams, they often own the important content that has to be produced. And so whether it's the product teams, the com teams, whoever that role is within the business unit, they really have to come together with marketing, and with IT because without great content, search is going to struggle to be great. Now we have some things we'll talk about in a moment that you can do to get around content that might not be optimal.

Tim:
Sure.

Steve:
But really is having whoever owns the content, the marketing teams, the digital market teams, the global corporate folks who own that mission. And then the third piece is the IT all coming together. And just having those conversations around making sure resources, people are aligned, make sure the budget's there to support everything. And where you have governance problems, so for example where our content team is constrained to changing content, that maybe the global or the corporate folks can help with that. Right?

Tim:
Yeah.

Steve:
They can either lean on folks who are maybe constraining them going up the food chain, or they can perhaps provide resources, money, to help with it.

Tim:
Yeah.

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Steve:
So again, just ensuring that all the resources come to all together, all the stakeholders come together and are aligned, that's going to be the first thing that is going to lead to more effective search.

Tim:
Cool, so prepare the team. So, number two?

Steve:
So measure the right things is the net of it, and the right things are essentially the customer experience. So how are folks using search? How are they navigating through search? And most importantly, are they finding the things that will help them achieve their goals? And when you look at what most technology platforms measure, and honestly, that's what people measure, right? They measure what data they can get out of their out their platform it often has to do with things around the search engine itself. Operational data, is the search engine functioning? And if there is any experience data at most, it is data that would talk about what happens on the search results page, did results appear? Did somebody click on something? Et cetera.

Steve:
And we really tell people to focus on beyond the click, right? What is happening after people click are people progressing along a journey, are they achieving their goals? And that goal could be a contact form, that goal could be downloading a white paper. That goal could just be engaging with a piece of content in a way that you understand, that you can measure that they achieve their goal.

Tim:
Yeah, I think one of the things... Not to do a commercial for SoloSegment, or at least not yet, we'll get to that. But one of the things that I think differentiates SoloSegment from so many other people out there is we are very focused on search success. It's not about search results, it is about business us results. And so I think that's exactly right, what you're saying, in terms of measuring is this leading to a business outcome that you're actually looking for your business. Because otherwise great that something showed up, but did it actually help the customer accomplish their goal and help your business accomplish theirs? So that makes sense.

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Steve:
Yeah, absolutely.

Tim:
Okay, so prepare the team, measure the right things. How about number three?

Steve:
Automate. So, we talked earlier, one when we talked about fails that relying upon humans to do all the work, right? You become constrained to the, you know, pipeline and capacity of your team. And so to the extent that you can automate improvement, that is clearly something you want to do. And this is tied very closely to the thing we just talked about, which is measures because if you have the right data about the customer experience, about what when people search for a certain thing, have a certain intent, you can then serve up the right answer, and increase the likelihood that they're going to progress along a journey. Well, okay, great. Now we know, when they want A give them B, and by the way, that means they're going to go C, D E and download that white paper, or fill out that contact form. Well, now why not automate that journey? Why not use that data to not only improve the search experience, but improve everything that happens after search.

Steve:
And so this automation is critically important, but it's not just about making the search results better so that they begin that journey, right. But the other thing that it's about is it allows you to do lots of very interesting things. And one thing I'll talk about now is AB testing. You could actually sit down and run different pieces of content, or run different types of algorithms. Or, run different types of... there's lots of ideas and marketers are very familiar with this because we do it all the time in campaigns and email. But have you ever seen anybody do it in search? And the answer is probably not.

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Steve:
And the reason they probably don't do it is because they don't have the right data to know which is the better experience. And so having the right data allows you to automate a lot of things. And one of the really important things that we know that we've demonstrated again and again with clients is that if you can AB test changes that you're making to your search engine, you no longer have to guess whether the customer experiences better, you will have data that demonstrates that the customer experience is better.

Tim:
Well, one of the things I love about this, this if it's not the one I get the most excited about, it's like the second one that I get most excited about. The reason is when I was running large company, consumer facing websites where we had millions of people coming to the website every day we always had a problem. We always had a problem of... and we could produce these reports every day. Our team had all these reports of all of the things we could do, except we only had the same number of people to do them every day. But we had the thing that basically said, "All you have to do is...", You know, "All you have to do..." And I'm doing very hefty air quotes around this, "... is have your it team go IT team go in and tune these several knobs, and have your content team go in and create certain content, and have your marketing team go in and drive more more media dollar to drive people to that content.

Tim:
Well, sure. But if we could just have had it happen automatically from the output of the report that's a win because you're never going to have enough people and you're never going to have enough time in the day to do all of the things that those reports tell you to do.

Steve:
Right, and often... Yeah.

Tim:
It's my favorite thing about what we do here because we just make that happen.

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Steve:
Yeah. You bet. And, and often the things that you can automate are the tedious things that would take time otherwise, and that gives you that time then to focus on actually the more important things. And I know we talked about the team sport at the top of this discussion, but content it's everything thing, right? Not only is it everything because it makes you search engine run

Tim:
Some say content is king.

Steve:
Oh, yeah. I've heard somebody say that before, but not only does it make the search engine run, but it's actually the thing that the humans are trying to find.

Tim:
Right, right.

Steve:
You have to make sure that it's really good.

Tim:
Right, makes total sense. Okay, so prepare the team, measure the right things, automate then what what's number four, Steve?

Steve:
Something I like to refer to as AI the right way. We're about to relaunch a new version of our homepage. And it's funny as I scanned it I realized we don't talk about AI, and machine learning, and natural language processing anywhere on that website. And I think what we've gotten very enamored with in the marketing community is like, "Oh, we got to get an AI project going." And we got to get an AI is a tool, right? So AI is a tool that helps you do the things, achieve the objectives that you want to achieve. And so from my perspective contextual AI is critically important and I've been asked, we're asked in RFPs, we see these questions come about, "Are you using machine learning?" Or, whatever. And the better question is, "How are you using it?"

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Steve:
And are you implying a way to say, "Are you using it in your automation to automatically make things better?" We've seen some technologies where, you know, AI machine learning is presented as a tool set that you can use but now you have to have somebody who has the skills to put those tools to work. I mean, I'd love to run a metal lathe, I have no idea how to run a metal lathe, so I have to hire a machinist to... you know?

Tim:
Yeah, yeah.

Steve:
And so it is using the AI to automate some of the critical processes, it is using AI to drive a better customer experience, but not using AI in the San that, oh, now you've got another to do, because as you just mentioned that to do list is long and people are not a never ending resource for most businesses.

Tim:
Well, and I had somebody say this to me literally earlier today, which I thought was interesting. We were having a conversation about AI and the like, and they said, "You know, it's kind of funny. I've never heard anybody say, are we going to have a hammer project. Or, are we going to have an Excel project?" Right?

Steve:
Sure.

Tim:
Because they're tools, right?

Steve:
Yes.

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Tim:
Now are we going to use a hammer correctly? If that's the right thing, are we going to use Excel correctly? If that's a necessary tool. But ultimately it comes down to what is the objective you're trying to get to. So I think that makes sense. So AI, the right way.

Steve:
Yeah, you bet. And I think that two, three years ago doing hammer projects in the AI space was appropriate.

Tim:
Of course.

Steve:
Because I always trying to figure out like, how do these things work? And so you wanted just an excuse to go out and play with them. But of course, I think we've progressed to the point where we're in that trough of disillusionment, and so we progressed to a spot where it's like, let's just get over talking about it, have it do something. And if it can automate the heck out of something, that's the most effective to do, whether that's using natural language processing in your content pipeline, machine learning and the algorithms that help you with relevancy scoring, but wherever it is, yeah, let the AI do the work. But if somebody says, "Oh yeah, we have AI. Here's a box of tools." That's not the kind of AI that you want to be running.

Tim:
Well, right. And I would point people to, there's a podcast episode that we did almost two years of ago, actually.

Steve:
Oh, wow.

Tim:
That asked, is AI hype all hype now? So I point people to our season one episode of, Is AI All Hype Now?

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Steve:
It was hype back then, now it's-

Tim:
We're sometimes a little we're sometimes a little ahead of the curve here, and that's okay.

Steve:
We are, we are.

Tim:
That's okay, that's fantastic. Okay, so prepare the team, measure the right things, automate, AI the right way. And that leads us to our fifth, but by no means last topic, which is?

Steve:
Search as a service. So a lot of technologies these days that you can get for search and it doesn't matter whether you're rolling your own, maybe you're, using elastic search on AWS, or elastic to search on Google cloud platform. There's a lot of software as a service out there. And this extends to some full featured enterprise technologies. And essentially it's tools, it's parts, and you assemble the thing that makes the most sense for your business. And this is the default model for almost all enterprise software. We no longer talk about, do we trust cloud or not, right? We just roll with it in the large enterprise space. And so software as a service is our default model. Now I think it suffers a little bit in the way that I think vendor led technology have suffered for a long time, when you're doing the implementation and the changeover for one technology to another, you have tons of budget, right?

Steve:
You did a business case, you went to finance and the business leaders and you got this big wad of cash. And they said, "Yep, go do the migration, make it flawless and go." And so you did it, you built this thing, you configured it, you, customized it where you wanted to customize it. And you've got this software as a service now that's running on the cloud, that's doing a fantastic job. And the big challenge in all enterprise software and probably all enterprise projects. But I certainly see it in the software space is that after the project is done, the amount of resource goes from like 5X to 0.5X, right. And so you're now-

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Tim:
If you're lucky, yeah.

Steve:
Well the problem is 0.5X is fine for the first six months.

Tim:
No, sure. Right, right...

Steve:
And it's a struggle for the next six months, but then about 12 months down the line, you have to change some configurations, and you've got some new requirements and your company did an acquisition. And before you know it, you're in that same place that you were, when you were putting software on your own servers down in the basement of the building next door. You've got constrained resources that have to do a pretty heavy lift and things get prioritized and it's hard to make progress. And so that's a long way of saying, we're focused on this search as a service idea. And it's almost a manage service idea, it's kind of a throwback to manage services ideas. But the idea here is that, outsource the whole thing. If you have a technology that can automate the heck, use the right data, yada yada, and deliver a great search experience, why take on the responsibility for operating and improving the thing. Give that to someone else.

Steve:
And as a former CIO exec myself, I remember that pain. I mean, the reason I know it went from 5X to 0.5X because I did that dozens of times, right?

Tim:
Of course. Right, right.

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Steve:
And so for me, when we built our technology and our platform, we said, "You know what? we're not going to do that, we're not going to put that on our clients. We're help our clients avoid that dead end because there really is a dead end." And the first problem that I talked about originally was too much focus on the technology. And often once you've gone down that 0.5X resource model for 12, 18, 24, 36 months, all of a sudden you start thinking, "Gee, my technology's not very good." And the reality is it's your business model, that's not very good. And so outsource that business model, outsource that operational model, invest in searches as a service, make it your vendors' problem, don't take that on yourself.

Tim:
You know, it's funny I've heard you talk about search as a service for some time now, and this is the first time this occurred to me. I used to joke, I ran large enterprise websites for 15 years of my career, and I used to joke, we would run into all these rogue projects where some regional marketing team, or somebody had created a website, and then later couldn't actually manage the thing. So I used to joke that the title of my first was going to be, Everyone Wants to Build a Website, No One Wants to Run One. And that's what you're describing, right? But what you're describing is everybody wants better search, but you don't really want to run it, and you probably shouldn't in most cases, right? It's not core to what you do. So it makes total sense, Steve.

Steve:
Yeah.

Tim:
So just to recap, you want to run down those five things real quick?

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Steve:

Yeah, you bet. So prepare the team, just remember it's all about content, marketing, and IT, bring that team together become tight, work for the same purpose, which is a greater, better customer experience. Second, make sure you're measuring the right thing, focusing on outcomes, whether that's outcomes for the visitor searching for their thing, or the business outcomes, right? Are they getting to a kind of conversion point? Third, automate. So, use that data now to automate as much of the improvement as you can so that you're not relying upon people turning knobs and dials, make sure that AI is an enabler, not an albatross, so the AI is doing some heavy lifting for you, and you're not left to figure out how to use the AI tools. And then finally outsource the risk essentially, right? You know, give the risk of better search to your vendor, focus on search as a service, not assume that risk yourself.

Tim:

Fantastic, Steve. As ever, many pearls of wisdom in there. I always learn things when we talk, it's always great to have this conversation. Any last words of wisdom you want to lay on folks before we wrap up?

Steve:

Well, you're looking at your budget, looking your search engine, look at your customer experience, look at the results you're getting for them. And if you're not getting those results at least begin the process. There are lots of ways to step into this early. You don't have to make big bang changes, but really understand. And it might be going back to those four failures and seeing, "Gee, do we have those failures in our organization? And if do you know, how can we solve them?" Because while I'd love to sell somebody a big software installation, the reality is if you get that first thing, if you do better at that first thing, if you have better governance, if you have better alignment between marketing and the product content, coms people, and the IT folks that in and of itself is going to help because awesome content does help search be better in and of itself.

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Tim:
Fantastic. And of course we would remind folks who are listening, that if you want to learn more about this, you can check us out at **SoloSegment.com/searchbox** and learn how search as a service can help you make your search improve outcomes for your customers every single day. All right, Steve, as ever a pleasure, hope you have a great rest of the day.

Steve:
Thanks very much, Tim.

Tim:
Thank you so much, talk to you soon.

Steve:
You too, take care.

Add these links to the show notes as well

Additional Links:
SearchChat Podcast: **AI in Marketing – Where Are We On The Hype Curve?**
Blog Post: **Is AI All Hype Now?**

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