

Search Off the Record - 47th episode

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[00:00:10] **John Mueller:** [00:00:10] 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 who knows, maybe having some fun along the way. My name is John Mueller, a part of the Google Search Relations team. I'm joined today by Lizzi Sassmann also from the Search Relations team. Hi Lizzi, what's new?

[00:00:31] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:00:31] Hey, John. Well, there are so many things new. I feel like this week's current obsession is probably the fact that I have now gotten myself three carnivorous plants. I had one and now I have two more, so I don't know if that qualifies as like an obsession, but probably, if you have more than one and you're wanting to speak about, it's an obsession. (laughs)

[00:00:54] But yeah, I think I'm trying to figure out how to keep them alive and then also motivated to kill.

[00:01:01] **John Mueller:** [00:01:01] So if you're a vegetarian, can you eat a carnivorous plant?

[00:01:06] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:01:06] I don't know it that would taste... are they poisonous? I think that they have some poison in there, but maybe it's just for the bugs.

[00:01:13] **John Mueller:** [00:01:13] I don't know.

[00:01:15] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:01:15] I don't know. This is a good question that I feel that I should know the answer of, as an owner of killer plants. Some of them... I have the basic one, the Venus flytrap one, I don't know. Vanessa. Do you have carnivorous plants?

[00:01:27] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:01:27] I have tried several different carnivorous plants and I have not been able to keep any of them alive, even though I tried to give them little buggies.

[00:01:39] My plan was I had a little AeroGarden that attracted bugs, so I put the carnivorous plants all around the AeroGarden to try to be pest control for my garden and I could not keep them alive, so I'm the worst person to ask.

[00:01:54] I do find the question interesting. I'm a vegan, and so it's interesting that I had carnivorous plants (laughs). I was encouraging the eating of other species on our planet. So, I'm going to have to really think about that one. No, I've never had that ethical, "What am I doing here? Am I helping or hurting nature?"

[00:02:20] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:02:20] This is not a plant podcast, I don't think, I think it has... It could be, I mean we've talked about it being a cooking podcast, and this is sort of related because I got the carnivorous plants to be pest control in the kitchen for the fruit fly situation that sometimes happens near bananas, but...

[00:02:40] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:02:40] Seems brilliant.

[00:02:41] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:02:41] It seems brilliant, but I think the fruit flies are too small for the Venus fly trap, which I think they need like a larger bug to trigger the closing of the mouth.

[00:02:51] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:02:51] You have to go hunt them outside and bring them back. (laughs)

[00:02:56] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:02:56] Yeah. And the plant guy at the plant store, he said that they should actually live outside and not inside. In Zurich, they can live in the winter too, apparently, and that they will be happy out there, and that they prefer rainwater because the water here is too nutritious for them, and they won't be motivated to kill because then they're getting fed from the water that you're watering them with.

[00:03:21] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:03:21] So you also have to go start capturing rainwater outside. This is going to become a full-time job for you. (laughs)

[00:03:28] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:03:28] Yeah, I know. I am now servicing these plants that are supposed to be working for me. Who's in charge here?

[00:03:35] **John Mueller:** [00:03:35] Speaking of who's in charge, I thought maybe I would jump back a little bit. As you noticed, Vanessa is here, this is Vanessa Fox.

[00:03:46] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:03:46] Hello.

[00:03:47] **John Mueller:** [00:03:47] And this is In the Spotlight series from the podcast where we invite folks from the larger Search Marketing community to come over and join us here.

[00:03:58] I was mostly curious, right about when I joined Google, you were also at Google, but then you left. Was it because of me?

[00:04:07] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:04:07] You know, John, I didn't want to tell you this. I've been keeping this myself all this time, I just had to get out of there. (laughs) No, that's not true at all.

[00:04:16] So yeah, it is interesting. You and I crossed paths briefly, and at that point, I had been building up Webmaster Central, I guess you want to call it all the different components of that, and things have really evolved and then you came in as part of that wonderful evolution. And yeah, that just happened to be... I kind of like, "Okay, everything's set. I can move on to other stuff."

[00:04:48] And actually, my thought at that time was to kind of get out of SEO and go do something else, because my thought was, "Okay, I've done this, now let me do something else." And obviously, that did not work out.. all that, because here I am, still quite loving every minute of it.

[00:05:07] **John Mueller:** [00:05:07] Cool. So how did you get started in all of this? Was it like Larry and Sergey came up to you and it was like, "You should make a tool for webmasters and call it Webmaster Tools."

[00:05:18] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:05:18] Oh, my goodness. Yeah, it's so interesting because it was really sort of the opposite of that. In fact, Larry and Sergey did not know about it and I don't know that they...

[00:05:27] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:05:27] Do they still not know about it?

[00:05:29] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:05:29] They were quite surprised, I think, when they... (laughs) You know, it's an interesting time. When I joined Google, which was way back in early 2005, it was really a different time. And I joined the Kirkland office, which was the Seattle office, basically. At the time, there were 25 people there. A very small office. And my background before joining Google was pretty eclectic. I was technical writing, that was how my career started and then from there, I got really involved in product management, UX and I spent a lot of that time with an engineering audience, so really a developer audience doing APIs and that type of thing.

[00:06:12] But also did a bit of marketing, and so, I built a website for the company I worked for in '95, it was cutting edge. I was like, "We need to have a website." I was "the" marketing person at the company. I had this eclectic background that ended up coincidentally working out really well for what happened when I went to Google.

[00:06:34] So yeah, when I got there, like I said, 25 people. I think there were 2200 people or something at the company in total. The dynamic at the time was just really free for all. And so, the director of engineering at that Kirkland office was really looking to start a project that was just from that office. And the way it worked, I got hired and I didn't have a manager. And it was just like, "Find a project." And I was like, "Okay!" (laughs)

[00:07:11] I would go down to Mountain View and work on these projects. But it was very hard because I'm not in the Mountain View office. And then only a month or two in, this head of the Kirkland office decided to do something called Sitemaps. And it was this idea of, "Okay, we'll do this XML file." That's all it was at the beginning. "Let's do this XML file and site owners can give us a list of URLs to crawl and index on their site and then that'll be..." At that time, you could imagine 2005, discovery was... could... I mean, it still can be hard, but a lot of sites didn't have any links to them, it was just hard sometimes find all the pages of the site.

[00:07:53] I was like, "Oh, I could work on this project because it's local and it's within my area of expertise. Because it's technical, I can write the docs for it. And so, it really started with that. And then once I got involved in that, again, since my personality is very much just like what needs to happen and just sort of tackling that, and the culture of the company at that time was, "Hey, what do you think is interesting to work on?" I really started to say, "Well who is this audience that we're building this for, and what's the audience inside of Google that we're building this for, and what do both sides need?"

[00:08:36] And at that time of course, I knew nothing. And so, I just started to investigate on my own, research the audiences. And from there, I heard about this person named Matt Cutts, and I was like, "Oh, let me talk to this guy, he seems to like be involved in this audience and know what's going on."

[00:08:54] And interestingly, Matt, in a way, had the same experience where he was head of the Spam team, right on the engineering side, but he also has that kind of personality like, "Who is the audience, what do they need?"

[00:09:10] And from there, he already had established, of course, this very robust relationship with site owners, SEOs, and then was helping them really on his own time. He had a blog, he would post in forums. And so, I started talking to him. And that's really where it started. We just had this idea of who is the audience and what do they need. And so we just made it up.

[00:09:37] **John Mueller:** [00:09:37] That sounds like the best way to move forward for something like that.

[00:09:40] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:09:40] John, you may recall these early days when XML Sitemaps first launched. What was your recollection of that?

[00:09:48] **John Mueller:** [00:09:48] Yeah. Think it was interesting timing from my side, because that was right about the time... I was working at my own company, and right about that time, I started getting interested more in websites and wondering, "Why my website wasn't really showing up in Search?" And then, the whole Sitemaps stuff was launched and I thought, "I could just write a Windows tool to do this." And it basically just went downhill or uphill from there, I guess. I don't know. One of the directions! (laughs)

[00:10:22] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:10:22] So was it sitemaps.org first and then the tool? Or what was the series of launches? There's a lot of things called Sitemaps. Everything, the branding was Sitemaps, "We are Sitemaps." Oh no. (laughs)

[00:10:34] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:10:34] Yes, sitemaps.org. Let me tell you about that. First of all, yes. Sitemaps was how it launched and originally, it was just the XML Sitemap. I think we had a Python generator or something, but then yeah, some tools like John's third party tools came out with that... other ways of generating sitemaps. And it just really started out like that and then as part of this, "Hey, what do people need" But also, how do we get people interested in sitemaps.

[00:11:06] There was a goal of how many sitemaps can we get submitted. And the thought was like, "Can we offer people something else, like data, for instance, to get them to come and sign up and then we could get them to do sitemaps." And so initially, once it became a UI and then how they think the query stats and a couple other things, we still call it sitemaps initially.

[00:11:31] At that point, there were two things called Sitemaps, the UI and the actual file. And of course, sitemap was already a term, HTML Sitemap. So that was already... it still to this day confuses people.

[00:11:43] Separately, a parallel track from that, we were trying to make XML Sitemaps be a web standard. And so, we were working with the other major search engines at the time, which was Microsoft and Yahoo to get them to accept this as well. And that's where sitemaps.org came from.

[00:12:06] And so how that came to be that sitemaps.org is that behind the scenes, of course, there's like legal people and marketing people and whoever tried to figure this out. And so, we would have these calls, these conference calls and, we would talk about, "Hey, this is what we're trying to accomplish, this is what it's going to be." And so, in order for everyone to come to an agreement, it was like, "Okay. Well, we need to see what this looks like."

[00:12:31] I have very poor website development skills, so I basically took Notepad or something and coded this very basic HTML website to just say, "Okay, here's the protocol. Here's what we're going to say." So I put that up as sitemaps.org and it was like this very... We had to use neutral color. We couldn't use the colors of Google or Microsoft. It had to be something else. So I just picked this like burgundy red or something and it was the most basic thing you ever saw, just so that everyone could see and agree. So everyone did.

[00:13:10] Somehow, that became like... There was no one to come in and make a real site. So they just kept that Notepad version, and that's what launched. And then I saw when schema.org launched, it launched the same color scheme.

[00:13:25] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:13:25] They copied it. They were like, "This is the aesthetic now. We have to use it." It's like a look, the fonts, everything. (laughs)

[00:13:33] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:13:33] And I think it may still look that way today. I mean I think at some point, someone went in and added JavaScript menu dropdowns or something, but it's the same thing that it was when I just was dot-dot-dot, typing my thing in Notepad. So I do find that funny, still. I really love that. (laughs)

[00:13:52] **John Mueller:** [00:13:52] Awesome. Everyone is like, "Oh, this was done on purpose by this fancy designer and we must keep this." So good.

[00:13:59] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:13:59] That's where that started. (laughs)

[00:14:02] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:14:02] And then you started blogging. There is also the sitemaps blog. At some point, there was this huge flurry of, "We're going to post about this."

[00:14:11] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:14:11] Products didn't have blogs. There was one other product that had a blog. And there was the main Google blog. And Karen Wickre who you all may know, she was in charge of that blog, she's awesome. She was very much for other products having blogs, even though as a company, I think blogging was like... It wasn't that it was new, but it kind of was new, and it was like, "Oh, I don't know... we don't know if everybody should just be posting all this stuff all the time." But since we were in this off-site office, it was really small, there was no one paying attention to us... (laughs)

[00:14:48] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:14:48] (laughs)

[00:14:49] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:14:49] And also, I didn't know. I was new to the company. No one told me what I could do and couldn't do. And so, I'm like, "Oh, there's a blog. Let's just start a blog. Hey." The other thing too kind of related is that the product was beta. This kind of moves ahead a little bit, but all the products at the time were these beta products. Gmail was beta, there was no... And it got to the point, at some point, where I was like, "Why is this beta? We should just take the beta label off." I didn't know that there was a process or that no products had done that.

[00:15:22] : [00:15:22] (laughs)

[00:15:23] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:15:23] Anyway, the blog was kind of that way and that's kind of how it started. And then once I was talking with Matt and then Matt's like, "Oh, you should come to these conferences and really talk to people." And so, he had me come to Search Marketing conference and you know really start to see that people have a lot of questions and they need a lot of things. And so, because again, my background, I've done a lot of technical writing and I'd written help centers in the past, I just wrote basically a whole help center.

[00:15:54] I went and talked to... there was this support team that answers email for all of Google, and at that time, there was just this team that basically, you would email support, and it could be about anything. It could be about why isn't my site in Search, it could be about ads, Gmail, whatever it was. And so, I spent a ton of time with them finding what are all the questions people are emailing you, what are the canned answers that you're using. And I think we reduced the support emails by 80% or something because we zeroed in on the questions that everyone was asking. And so yeah, from there, kind of built this help center and then the early version of the tools and...

[00:16:37] So all that existed before any of this was a single page. And it was the webmaster guidelines, but it was a very short, small page. And I think it was at google.com/webmasters. So we took that over, that folder structure and just launched all this stuff and then returned the webmaster--

[00:16:59] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:16:59] At the root. (laughs)

[00:17:00] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:17:00] Yeah, we turned the webmaster guidelines into this much more comprehensive thing. Well, Marissa Mayer was head of whatever her title. She's basically head of all the product managers, head of all the product... kind of in charge of everything. So she didn't know any of this was going on. I didn't... we didn't run anything by anybody. (laughs) Apparently she would give talks and she'd be like "Oh..." And... Not for site owners but just more PR talks of like, "Oh, hey as part of the Search, we have these guidelines that the algorithms really make sure that everything adheres to." And she would just pull up google.com/webmasters to show this single page. And she did that apparently at one point and it was not there. So that was the first time that she knew of us.

[00:17:49] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:17:49] (laughs)

[00:17:50] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:17:50] She was like, "What is happening?" I was like, "Oh, no!" It all worked out in the end, but... (laughs) That was how that really started. So yeah, from there, we just really dove in, and then... So it was very, as you can imagine, quite a fun thing to, like I say, dive in on both the audience side and the inside of Google side, "What do you all need?" And come up with what we could.

[00:18:18] You're always also like, "Okay, you can't let spammers know what's going on." There's always this... the tension of all that. And so, my inclination is always to provide as much help and information as possible. Like understanding what would really make sense to include and not include. It was quite an involved and fun process.

[00:18:38] **John Mueller:** [00:18:38] Cool. And that kind of led, I guess, to webmaster tools and the comprehensive guidelines and all of that.

[00:18:45] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:18:45] As that started, we were like, "We have got change the name. We can't call it sitemaps." And so, we came up with this Webmaster Central for the whole thing and then Webmaster Tools for just the data part of it. And the big debate there was what do you call it, everyone had opinions. And webmaster... as you recall from back in those days, everything was used to that term, and the webmaster was the person in charge the website. There was so much debate though of like, "What can we use instead?" Because it seemed like things were beginning to shift away from that. But it was so early that there wasn't a good term, but we spent so much time talking about that.

[00:19:34] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:19:34] Were there any other options like even remotely close that you recall that were like maybe any of your personal favorites?

[00:19:43] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:19:43] Not that I can recall. Internally, it's interesting because it was called the console internally, and I think now, that's the external name for it. The internal name of the team was Webmaster Happiness. We did have that webmaster term and everybody was like... We had shirts made up that said Webmaster Happiness. It's like everything was around how could we really help this group of people. So webmaster was such a... that term, it was just so commonly used. Now there's so many like... You could certainly say site owner, but we were like, "Is it?" It may not be the owner of the site, it may not be just the marketing side, it's not just the technical side. Even now, it's hard to come up with a term for what it would be.

[00:20:31] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:20:31] Because there's so many people that could be touching a website. It's not like one term that's site owner...

[00:20:37] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:20:37] Yeah, we started with the SEO audience, even though we were like, "This isn't just for SEOs, but in 2006, 2007, they were still the ones most interested in this kind of data, and the ones that worked on it the most. There were also a lot of discussions of who is the audience. It shouldn't just be SEOs but they are the ones who care the most right now, so we need to cater to them first. Definitely a lot of discussions about all that.

[00:21:05] **John Mueller:** [00:21:05] Cool and then, as you transitioned away from Google, you wrote a book, I remember. How did that come up? Then, once I did leave Google and I was doing other things, I wasn't planning on continuing to be involved in SEO at all. I thought I'd be doing something else. But then this... I kept getting all these questions and I was still speaking at conferences because I was getting invitations. But then I would get emails all the time, right, and then people would just ask me questions all the time. So I got this opportunity to write a book and I thought, "Oh, great, I can just answer all the questions in a book, and that's going to solve it." And so, I wrote this book "Marketing in the Age of Google." Essentially a great experience.

[00:21:50] I still think the book holds up even though there's older information... The fundamentals are the same, right. But I found that I still got as many or more questions than before. I was spending so much time on that that I eventually was like, "Oh, maybe I should charge for all this advice that I give." So I ended up staying in SEO and now, it's been years and years and I love it. I feel like there's always new challenges. No matter what I work on, I feel like there's like always something new.

[00:22:27] And I spent some time... I built an agency for a while where it had people working for me, but now, to me, I just prefer a one-on-one type thing, so that's what I've been doing since. I also launched software that uses the Google Search Console API, really diving into the query data part of it. It kind of started with the book. The point of the book was using data about what people search for to understand audiences. And so, it really started from that, of like how can we take the query data and turn it into categories and track things at a topic level, that kind of thing.

[00:23:09] And so, that still continues to this day. We've got that software out there, which is the Keylime Toolbox. So yeah, even now, because these questions are coming up again, now I'm wanting to launch now a new education site to bring it back full circle. It's the same...

[00:23:28] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:23:29] (laughs)

[00:23:29] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:23:30] I'll just... one last.

[00:23:30] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:23:31] Sitemaps, V2.

[00:23:31] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:23:31] One last story. I'll tell you about this. In 2006, I wrote on Matt Cutts' blog this post about using hyphens in URLs, which at 2006, things were different. Once a month, I'm in a call where someone's like, "We changed all the URLs on our site to you use hyphens because we know that that's a best practice." And I'm like, "No! It's all my fault." I'm coming to haunt myself.

[00:23:58] **John Mueller:** [00:23:58] (laughs)

[00:24:00] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:24:00] (laughs) I'm like, "Okay, that's the idea of this new site." It's like let's just get something like fundamental best practices, not all of the extra stuff that you see, but just like, "Here's some fundamental reference to fall back on to." Yeah, make up for all that stuff that's out there.

[00:24:24] **John Mueller:** [00:24:24] Cool. So you'll be answering the question about sub-directories versus subdomains?

[00:24:29] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:24:29] (laughs) Well, John, I feel like no one's ever figured that out yet. Has anyone talked about that? (laughs)

[00:24:39] **John Mueller:** [00:24:39] Oh my gosh. The endless questions.

[00:24:42] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:24:42] Yeah. Fun times.

[00:24:43] **John Mueller:** [00:24:43] Cool.

[00:24:44] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:24:44] Endless, yeah.

[00:24:45] **John Mueller:** [00:24:45] Why did you call it Keylime toolbox and not webmasters tools tools or...

[00:24:51] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:24:51] I know. Don't you know by now I'm terrible at naming. (laughs) Hasn't this discussion told us anything? I wanted... because I couldn't come up with anything else other than webmaster or site owner or whatever. So it's like, "Let's just come up with... let's just use a name that means nothing, that's just like a fun, happy name." A name does not have to be what it is. Of course, that has brought it's own share of problems. (laughs)

[00:25:25] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:25:25] Like it's tools for lime farmers or something or like...

[00:25:28] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:25:28] Well, it's like no one knows what it is then. That's the new site's like, "We have got to come up with a name that's just boring and descriptive." (laughs) Yeah.

[00:25:41] **John Mueller:** [00:25:41] Cool. Well, thanks for joining us here. It's been super fascinating and fun to have you here and of talking about the olden times.

[00:25:49] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:25:49] Yeah. Thanks for having me. It's so fun to think about so long ago.

[00:25:53] **John Mueller:** [00:25:53] Where can folks find you if they have any questions they want to send you? (laughs)

[00:25:59] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:25:59] (laughs) Well, I'm on Twitter, of course. [vanessafox](#). The software is [keylimetoolbox.com](#) and then the new site, that's not launched yet, I just have an email sign up as [seocompendium.com](#), which maybe is too long of a word, we'll see. (laughs) But yeah. And then if you want the nature pics, I'm also on Instagram, [vanessa--](#)

[00:26:27] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:26:27] Nature pics? Oh, we didn't even go... photography too! What the heck?

[00:26:31] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:26:31] I know, the deer, the hummingbirds, the rabbits. You got it all on my Instagram. So that'd be (laughs) where I'd start.

[00:26:40] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:26:40] I think we're doing a follow up podcast, like a branch off series about hummingbirds and killer plants. I think that's what's happening. For sure.

[00:26:49] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:26:49] Definitely, I'm all in on that. (laughs)

[00:26:52] **John Mueller:** [00:26:52] We'll have to move on to a different topic for the next episode. Sorry. Because next time, on the Search Off the Record podcast, we'll have another exciting episode for you from folks from the Search Relations team.

[00:27:07] ♪ (music) ♪

[00:27:11] **John Mueller:** [00:27:11] We've been having fun with these podcast episodes and I hope you, the listener, has 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 virtual or in-person events that we go to if you have any thoughts.

[00:27:27] And of course, don't forget to like and subscribe. Thank you and goodbye.

[00:27:33] **Lizzi Sassmann:** [00:27:33] Bye.

[00:27:34] **Vanessa Fox:** [00:27:34] Bye. Thank you.

[00:27:35] 🎵 (music) 🎵