

How Referral Traffic Undermines Long-Term Brand Growth via @sejournal, @martinibuster

Mordy Oberstein, a search marketing professional whom I hold in high esteem, recently shared the provocative idea that referral traffic is not a brand's friend and that every brand, as it matures, should wean itself from it. Referrals from other websites are generally considered a sign of a high-performing business, but it's not a long-term strategy because it depends on sources that cannot be controlled.

Referral Traffic Is Necessary But...

Mordy Oberstein (LinkedIn profile), formerly of Wix, asserted in a Facebook post that relying on a traffic source, whether that's another website or a search engine, offers a degree of vulnerability to maintaining steady traffic and performance.

He broke it down as a two-fold weakness:

- Relying on the other site to keep featuring your brand.
- Relying on Google to keep ranking that other site which in turn sends visitors to your brand.

The flow of traffic can stop at either of those two points, which is a hidden weakness that can affect the long-term sustainability of healthy traffic and sales.

Mordy explained:

"It's a double vulnerability...

1) Relying on being featured by the website (the traffic source)

2) Relying on Google to give that website ...traffic (the channel)

There are two levels of exposure & vulnerability.

As your brand matures, you want to own your own narrative.

More referral traffic is not your friend. It's why, as a brand matures, it should wean off of it.

Full disclosure, this is my opinion. I am sure a lot of people will disagree."

Becoming A Destination

I've always favored promoting a site in a way that helps it become synonymous with a given topic because that's how to make it a default destination and encourage the kinds of signals that Google interprets as authoritative. I've done things like created hats with logos to give away, annual product giveaways and other promotional activities, both online and offline. While my competition was doing SEO busy work I created fans. Promoting a site is basically just getting it in front of people, both online and offline.

Brand Authority Is An Excuse, Not A Goal

Some SEOs believe in a concept called Brand Authority, which is a misleading explanation for why a website rank. The term Brand Authority is not about Branding and it's not about Authoritativeness, either. It's just an excuse for why a site is top-ranked.

The phrase Brand Authority has its roots in PageRank. Big brand websites used to have a PageRank of 9 out of 10 and even a 10/10, which enabled them to rank for virtually any keywords they wanted. A link from one of those sites practically guarantee a top ten ranking. But Google ended the outsized influence of PageRank because it resulted in less relevant results, which was around 2004-ish, about the time that Google started using Navboost, a ranking signal that essentially measures how people feel about a site, which is what PageRank does, too.

This insight, that Google uses signals about how people feel about a site, is important because the feelings people have for a business are what being a brand is all about.

Marty Neumeier, a thought leader on how to promote companies (author of The Brand Gap) explained what being a brand is all about:

“Instead of creating the brand first, the company creates customers (through products and social media), the customers build the brand (through purchases and advocacy), and the customer-built brand sustains the company (through “tribal” loyalty). This model takes into account a profound and counterintuitive truth: a brand is not owned by the company, but by the customers who draw meaning from it. Your brand isn’t what you say it is. It’s what they say it is.”

Neumeier also explains how brand is about customer feelings:

“The best brands are vivid. They create clear mental pictures and powerful feelings in the minds and hearts of customers. They’re brought to life through their touchpoints, the places where customers experience them, from the first exposure to a brand’s name, to buying the product, to eventually making it part of who they are.”

That “tribal loyalty” is the kind of thing Google tries to measure. So when Danny Sullivan talks about differentiating your site to make it like a brand, he is not referring to so-called “brand authority.” He is talking about doing the kinds of things that influence people to feel positive about a site.

Getting Back To Mordy Oberstein

It seems to me that what he’s saying is that referral traffic is a stepping stone towards becoming a destination, it’s a means to an end. It’s not the goal, it’s a step toward the goal of becoming a destination.

On the other side of that process, I think it’s important to maintain relevance with potential site visitors and customers, especially today with the rapid pace of innovation, generational change, new inventions, and new product models. Relevance to people has been a Google ranking signal for a long time, beginning with PageRank, then with additional signals like Navboost.

The SEO factor that the SEO industry has largely missed is the part about getting people to think positive thoughts about your site and your business, enough to share with other people.

Mordy’s insight about traffic is beautiful and elegant.

Read Mordy’s entire post on Facebook.

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