

Search Off the Record - 39th episode

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[00:00:10] **Gary Illyes:** [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 having some fun along the way. My name is Gary Illyes, and I'm joined today by Lizzi Sassman from the Search Relations team, of which I'm also part of. Say hi. Lizzi.

[00:00:30] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:00:30] I'm sorry. I'm afraid, I can't do that.

[00:00:32] **Gary Illyes:** [00:00:32] What? Just say hi.

[00:00:34] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:00:34] I'm reading this script. I don't know. It's there in the notes.

[00:00:37] **Gary Illyes:** [00:00:37] What script?

[00:00:38] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:00:38] I'm looking at it. You're looking at it, too. Should I say, "Hi Gary"?

[00:00:45] **Gary Illyes:** [00:00:45] Just forget it. That was Lizzi. So, continuing with our In the Spotlight series, in which we present folks from the larger search marketing community who inspire us. Today, we have a very special guest, someone who's very close to my heart in a very professional way, Michelle Robbins.

[00:01:08] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:08] Hello. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:10] **Gary Illyes:** [00:01:10] Well, hi. I think I haven't seen you in person for a very long time. Two years?

[00:01:16] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:16] It's been a minute.

[00:01:17] **Gary Illyes:** [00:01:17] I think it was PopCom Vegas when we last met.

[00:01:21] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:21] I think so.

[00:01:22] **Gary Illyes:** [00:01:22] Or something like that.

[00:01:23] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:23] Yeah, that would have been the last big conference before COVID.

[00:01:27] **Gary Illyes:** [00:01:27] Right, and then lock downs and staying away from people, and then we got bored at one point, if I remember correctly. And we started a bake-off.

[00:01:38] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:38] Yes.

[00:01:39] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:01:39] Who started it?

[00:01:38] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:01:38] One of us baked something and saw it. And I may have seen something that Gary baked, and I was like inspired to bake something. And then I think something, and then he bakes something and it just kind of went back and forth every week, where we sort of up the ante on the challenge of baking. And there was one consistent thread through Gary's bakes, however.

[00:02:04] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:02:04] OK, tell me more.

[00:02:07] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:02:07] The man likes his matcha is all I will say.

[00:02:10] **Gary Illyes:** [00:02:10] Well, yeah, because matcha is amazing, and you have to put it in everything.

[00:02:15] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:02:15] And you're a matcha guy.

[00:02:16] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:02:16] He is a matcha guy.

[00:02:17] **Gary Illyes:** [00:02:17] Yeah, and that's why I have the matchaguy.com. But baking is not why we

are here, because it turns out this is not a cooking show. So I would want to talk a little bit about you as well after all the baking, because your career is quite inspiring and maybe we can inspire someone by telling your story. Do you remember when was the first time you encounter the computer?

[00:02:41] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:02:41] Yeah.

[00:02:42] **Gary Illyes:** [00:02:42] What kind of computer it was?

[00:02:43] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:02:43] Oh gosh. I can't remember what kind of computer it was. I remember it being very large. My mother worked at a law firm. She was a paralegal, and so she worked on these very large computers for her job. And in the summers during junior high school, I would go in and do file clerk stuff. And so that was the first time I ever saw computers. They were definitely DOS-based.

[00:03:09] **Gary Illyes:** [00:03:09] And what were you doing on those computers? Playing games or...

[00:03:12] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:03:12] I was file clerk. I was filing papers.

[00:03:16] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:03:16] You know, I have like a similar story of with DOS computers in my first interaction with the computer at my grandpa's optometry office and doing patient data entry with the program that he made on DOS, and that was like a summer job.

[00:03:35] **Gary Illyes:** [00:03:35] Did you get paid?

[00:03:36] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:03:36] I think there was some kind of deal about a car being passed down or something. So it worked itself out that I got like a hand-me-down vehicle. So I was paid with the equipment, I guess.

[00:03:50] **Gary Illyes:** [00:03:50] Well, if you got paid, then it's not slavery, I guess.

[00:03:53] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:03:53] I got paid.

[00:03:55] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:03:55] With money.

[00:03:56] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:03:56] With money, yeah.

[00:03:57] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:03:57] I guess you can be paid in other ways, but with money, you've got to choose what to do with the money.

[00:04:02] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:04:02] Exactly.

[00:04:03] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:04:03] Yes, the car was to drive me to future jobs, so I think it was meant to be a vehicle in more ways than one, I guess.

[00:04:11] **Gary Illyes:** [00:04:11] Interesting! And Michelle, do you remember when was the first time you encountered the Internet by any chance?

[00:04:17] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:04:17] It was actually AOL Instant Messenger when people started using that. That was the first time, besides local network protocols, I mean, obviously email at work. But communicating with people not on your corporate network was AOL Instant Messenger, and then ICQ. Do you remember ICQ, anybody?

[00:04:37] **Gary Illyes:** [00:04:37] I never actually used ICQ. In our group, it was somehow frowned upon to use ICQ. I don't know why, I don't remember why and everyone was using IRC and MIRC application, and that was amazing for many reasons. But ICQ, no.

[00:04:56] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:04:56] Was AIM much after that?

[00:04:58] **Gary Illyes:** [00:04:58] AIM?

[00:05:00] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:05:00] That's AOL's Instant Messenger.

[00:05:01] **Gary Illyes:** [00:05:01] I remember the name.

[00:05:02] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:04:56] AOL Instant Messenger, yes, that's...

[00:05:04] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:05:04] So AOL was before ICQ, but then AIM really took off, and I don't think it contributed to the death of ICQ, but everyone eventually moved off of ICQ as well. There was trillion. That was more of an app that you could combine all of the different platforms in.

[00:05:22] **Gary Illyes:** [00:05:22] And how about websites? Did you have favorite websites where you went and checked recipes, for example, because of a cooking show?

[00:05:29] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:05:29] They were not recipes on the web net back in the day. No, I didn't actually start meaningfully working on the Internet, using the Internet until much later when I was working at the software and online startup in Orange County.

[00:05:47] **Gary Illyes:** [00:05:47] Oh, cool.

[00:05:47] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:05:47] That was, after I first really started to--It was after I had worked in marketing at Disney. And so, very traditional media, traditional marketing. And left there to join a startup from some friends from college.

[00:06:01] And half of the business was focused on software, web server utility development; and the other half was online, getting people to get websites. And it was really funny, because we would hold these luncheon learns where we would have local businesses come in and we'd be like, "This is the Internet and you should probably have a domain name." And so we had registered like El Pollo Loco. We had so many brands names because this is before they--we tried to convince them like, "look we have your domain name, but you should have let us build a website for you." And they just thought we were bananas. It was really really an interesting time.

[00:06:39] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:06:39] And at this point, did you have your own website like you're going around telling other people "You should have a website, did you have one?"

[00:06:46] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:06:46] I did not, because from my perspective, websites were for businesses. I did not have a business yet, and so I did not see a need for a website. I wasn't like, "Hey, look at me," so I didn't have a use for one and I considered it was more work aligned. It's what we did it at work, and we built applications and things like that.

[00:07:12] It wasn't until later that when I had my own consulting business, and that's when I pivoted into actually a way for marketing and more into computer science, because while I was at the company, it's actually where I also learned search marketing first. The online division was run by Danny Sullivan--you might have heard of him--and Ken was the founder of the software company and has been my long-time mentor in my programming career. So I learned search marketing as search marketing evolved from the very early days.

[00:07:48] In fact, one time, a bunch of us were at the movies. It was an off-site and we were all in line. It was "Empire Strikes Back" was back in theaters, come on. So we're all in line and I remember Ken and Danny were talking about e-commerce, and this is before there was e-commerce. But they were asking me and another woman that worked there. They were like, "Do you think you'd ever buy clothes online?" And I was like, "What are you kidding? Why would you do that?"

[00:08:17] So it's really been fun to kind of see the entire evolution of just using the web for information and for understanding information, and shifting into it just being a daily part of our lives that we don't even think about.

[00:08:32] **Gary Illyes:** [00:08:32] In the background, I'm also counting that this was the your third job that you mentioned.

[00:08:37] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:08:37] Or career change, working on jobs from a variety of industry.

[00:08:40] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:08:40] So that was the second. So I went from Disney to the startup. And then from there, I really wanted to understand what the software side was doing. So they had brought me in to do sales and marketing, because that was my background. And so, I felt if I understood more about what they did and about the programs, then I could more effectively market them.

[00:09:03] So I said I want to understand more about actually what you guys do at a more fundamental level, and this is where I think that when you talk about career development and how you can become involved in any given industry or anything, I think the importance of having mentors and having people to sponsor you on your career trajectory is so critical.

[00:09:24] I 100% would not be where I am today, but for these four really key individuals that helped influence me and support me on my own journey. And so from the software side, these three guys--basically two of them said, "Tell you what, pick a topic, set aside an hour in the conference room. Every week, pick a topic and we'll tell you all about it."

[00:09:49] I was like, "OK, great, first topic: TCP. What's that all about?" Because my background wasn't actually--from an educational standpoint--in technology. I doubled in criminal justice and psychology, so this was a complete 360 for me.

[00:10:05] But once we started diving into it, I realized this is really interesting, and I really want to learn more and do more, so I went back to UCI and took programming courses through their extension. And I focused primarily on Microsoft technologies, because they built Microsoft web server utilities. So that was the technologies utilized in all of our programs. So when my first learning program, it was all Microsoft with CMVP, all of that. So that's kind of what started my career shift into technology.

[00:10:41] And from there, there was also another person at the company who's now been at Google for probably over 20 years, who at that time, was our primary developer and designer. He had come out of art school and he taught me HTML and CSS. So I learned that from him and I learned the programming from these two incredible programmers who are now working like, one works in bio-metric authentication at Verisign, and others worked at Snap and is now at Facebook, I think. So I had incredible mentors. and then of course I learned search marketing and all about search engines from Danny. So I consider myself very fortunate.

[00:11:19] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:11:19] This is mind-blowing. One thing I find very interesting is that among, let's say, my circles, you are typically known as the person, that correct person who used to run these massive search engine marketing shows. And you are more related to SEO than to computer science, but it turns out that you're related to computer science and psychology and marketing--traditional marketing more than SEO folks.

[00:11:54] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:11:54] Well yeah, I mean yes/no. So once the software founder relocated to the Bay Area, Danny Sullivan relocated to England for a time to do his own consulting and Spin-up search engine watch. And then I opened my own consulting business where I started doing web design and development, application development for clients. And as part of that work, I would also do their SEO, it was just sort of SEO. I have done a lot of "Oh and here's SEO." So I have done a lot of SEO, but that's not my passion or my focus.

[00:12:30] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:12:30] What is your passion and focus?

[00:12:32] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:12:32] Actually, right now, my focus is definitely data and data science, but I've always had a passion for data and this goes back to my undergraduate work as well.

[00:12:44] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:12:44] And your undergraduate work was in criminal justice and psychology?

[00:12:48] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:12:48] Yes.

[00:12:49] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:12:49] And how did the data kind of come into play there?

[00:12:52] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:12:52] All research--you do a lot you do a lot of research, and what you come to understand about data and how data is used, and how to better and worse use data, I would say, is applicable in marketing.

[00:13:07] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:13:07] That's sort of interesting, like you you've got that base of how to look at the data from that kind of lens and then diving more technical.

[00:13:14] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:13:14] Yes.

[00:13:15] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:13:15] Or how to procure the data and then analyze it.

[00:13:18] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:13:18] So it sounds like a very non-linear career path, right? to go from marketing to tech and media and data, but data really does underpin all of it in each of those domains.

[00:13:32] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:13:32] And it sounds like each sort of iteration of your career has sort of been driven by your own interest or on-the-job learning, or that you had a mentor who maybe suggested something. I am curious about that how did the seed get planted. Maybe you should return to computer science and go back to school.

[00:13:50] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:13:50] So the the seed got planted from basically working with these great guys who never said no, right; who never said "Don't worry your pretty little head about that. That's programming, you're not going to get that." I never heard that. I never encountered a blocker, right. It was always like, "Hey, yeah, we'll show you how to do that." And then I went back to school. And any questions I had, they're like, "Yeah, no, this is how this works. This is how that works." They were just incredibly generous and supportive.

[00:14:23] And like I said, having that, I think, is critical and then it is my own interest and passion. So after I was at the media company for 12 years and I had felt like, "Well, I've kind of done everything that I'm going to do here." So a couple of years before I decided to leave, I had taken a certificate course out of MIT on big data and social analytics, and that was my first opportunity, then, to start writing in Python because I hadn't done anything in Python prior to that point, everything was kind of Lamp Stack-focused.

[00:14:56] And being able to understand the power and capability of analyzing big data sets to get that opportunity, to have the opportunity to continue pursuing that, I needed to shift into a different industry, into different focus. And I've been able to do that. It's been fantastic. And I have decided to once again go back to school and I'm getting my master's, and I start a master's program in the summer.

[00:15:22] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:15:22] Amazing, this summer, you're going to start...oh...

[00:13:50] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:13:50] Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'll start it this summer.

[00:15:27] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:15:27] Do you have any interesting anecdotes or data anecdotes?

[00:15:31] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:15:31] Yes.

[00:15:32] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:15:32] Yeah, I know that you are so into data that you must have something interesting you...

[00:15:38] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:15:38] Like a favorite data set.

[00:15:41] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:15:41]
Oh gosh, favorite data set, um...

[00:15:44] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:15:44] Honestly, what I'm most interested in looking at these days when considering non-marketing-based data sets, right. So data that's not directly related to the work I'm doing day to day. I'm most interested in understanding ethical applications and use of data. And so ultimately, where I want to end up is on the ethics side of AI and machine learning.

[00:16:11] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:16:11] Interesting, I imagine that kind of roots in certain biases in data that might be there.

[00:16:16] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:16:16] Yes, and actually, that's how it does tie back to my undergraduate work. So I had to do a really large research project on the death penalty at one point, and looking at all of the data around just criminal justice data in general. And when you consider that these data sets are being used in the models where predictive policing is being used, the problems with these data sets are significant, because these data sets are created by humans who bring their own subjectivity and bias to every decision-making step in the criminal justice system.

[00:16:55] So whether or not you get pulled over by a policeman; whether or not that policeman gives you a ticket; whether or not you go to court and you get bail, you get sent--I mean there's discretion at every step of the way. And how do you account for discretion in a data set and bias that filters that finds its way into those data sets, and then those data sets are being utilized for decision making, and that's highly problematic.

[00:17:20] So when we think about starting even just with the research, I found the information that I found in

doing the research as an undergrad on the death penalty, which was really shocking to discover that it has less to do with people think and we can cut this out if we're going on a tangent here, just FYI, but...

[00:17:36] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:17:36] It's good.

[00:17:37] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:17:37] I don't know.

[00:17:38] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:17:38] Just for you notification.

[00:17:39] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:17:39] Yes.

[00:17:41] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:17:41] It's not the race of the perpetrator that determines who's going to get the death penalty. It's the race of the victim

[00:17:47] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:17:47] Interesting.

[00:17:48] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:17:48] Yes, that was shocking to discover, and just the problems with how the death penalty gets adjudicated throughout. And there's research that's been replicated over and over and over to support this and here we are.

[00:18:02] So I've always been fascinated by looking into data and especially data around human behavior, which when you think about marketing, that's the data we're all using. So, how are people using our websites; how are people finding us; what are the words they're using. That's behavioral data.

[00:18:18] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:18:18] Yeah, that can be really problematic when the sources that go into that data set that you have is not fully inclusive or including all the the types. I don't know, the sense is getting away from me, but... [laughter]

[00:18:33] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:18:33] No, no, and I do think that when we talk about the data that we all use in our our day-to-day jobs and everything, I don't think there's enough interrogation of the source of the data sets. How these data sets are gathered? So many people rely on third-party data sets or tools.

[00:18:50] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:18:50] And we just like trust it implicitly, like if you just cite your source, you've referenced something, but then if you go and dig into "OK, how many people were in that study," Oh, it was only 20 of them, or this was only from the US or something. Can we really make a decision based off of that? Once you sort of start digging in, then you realize is this really representative and can we trust it?

[00:19:12] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:19:12] Oh yeah, absolutely. I was asked to put together an algorithm to determine just something. It doesn't actually matter what it was trying to determine, but the suggestion was that I used sentiment on Twitter as part of that data set and I said "No."

[00:19:29] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:19:29] That's a bad way to go.

[00:19:31] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:19:31] And they didn't understand why wouldn't you. And I said, "Well, because most of America, most of the world is not actually on Twitter, you're dealing with a very problematic data set, and the people that are on are very inactive, so you're injecting bias into the system. You can't use Twitter as a barometer.

[00:19:50] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:19:50] I mean that sort of begs the question "Is there any data set that is unbiased?" Can you have something that is trusted or well-rounded?

[00:19:58] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:19:58] I would say no. Honestly, I think that you can gather a lot of your own first-party data and that's going to be the most informative for actions already taken, things you already know, but when you start mixing that data with third-party data sets and using it in ways that the artifacts of that data were not necessarily intended to be utilized, right.

[00:20:23] So it's always a matter of--whenever anyone comes to me and says, "we need a report that has this, this and this, I always say, "What are the questions you're trying to answer?" because I don't necessarily think that people understand the data they need to answer the questions they have. I think people just assume we have this data, therefore this is the answer.

[00:20:41] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:20:41] Yeah, you have to find the right data within your data set to support whatever point you are making, but that also has the trouble that very often I see that people are

misrepresenting the data in some sense. Basically, they are saying that this happened. Ergo, this is the way, for example. And then when you are actually looking at the data set or the data, it's like "Well, actually, yeah, you can explain it that way, but you can also explain it like ten other ways.

[00:21:08] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:21:08] Oh, for sure.

[00:21:09] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:21:09] Why that data is there? And that feels like bigger problem that we have not just in the SEO industry, but in many many industries where people are picking cherry, picking data that support their hypothesis and then just use that. And it's not a new thing either, because like end of 90s for example, this doctor I was air-quoting here who came up with this brilliant idea that vaccines cause certain conditions. That was basically cherry-picking and it led to a big change in how certain people perceive vaccines, for example.

[00:21:53] So yeah, you definitely have to be careful about how you are presenting the data, because you can mislead people very easily with it voluntarily or involuntarily.

[00:22:02] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:22:02] Yeah, if you torture the data, it will talk and there's a lot of torturing of data going on quite a bit. I would also suggest that in marketing, people tend to still operate in silos while everyone says omnichannel is the way the truth and light. In reality, people still focus on their silo and the data within their silo and don't necessarily understand how data from all of those channels impacts one another.

[00:22:31] I have a great example of this. We had a client. This agency had been brought on to do just their paid lead funnel had been drying up, and so they switched to using us for just their paid. We'd only worked with them for about three months, and they weren't seeing the results they were wanting to see. And so usually, I hear from people when there's a problem and so they couldn't figure out what's going on here? We're doing everything right. We're getting leads, but yet overall they're not. And so, I spent about a week diving into all of the data that we had with this client, market data with respect to are there things happening in the market that could be negatively impacting them.

[00:23:09] I know a lot of people don't think to go outside and look at market data and offline impacts, couldn't really find anything that was incredibly conclusive, so I got on the phone with the head of marketing at the clients, and I said, "Tell me what you guys were doing in this quarter"--and it was a quarter about a year ago--because after that quarter that everything seemed to sort of fall off the charts in every single channel for them, all the channels .

[00:23:35] And they said, "Well, you know, we weren't really doing anything different. Oh, wait, we did stop running billboards and we pulled all of our media buys on TV, and we stopped doing bus advertisements. I was like, "OK, thank you very much." And that was it. That's a data void that a lot of digital marketers don't concern, don't consider the data they don't have and how does that data impact the data they do have.

[00:24:05] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:24:05] My favorite example for this or similar example is a seasonality of traffic, for example, in SEO. And the first time I encountered this, I was like a very junior SEO for a very small company, and the owner was complaining that we are bleeding traffic and the traffic is going away. This was in January and then in February it was worse. And in March he was yelling like crazy, because there was no traffic. And then he was showing that in December, there was so much traffic, like "What happened to that?" We were just sitting there, it's like, "Well, gee, I wonder what happened, people were buying your product in December, and now they are not interested in it anymore. Because it's not Christmas season, but he refused to accept that.

[00:24:58] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:24:58] That's crazy, but it's not surprising.

[00:25:00] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:25:00] I mean if you're thinking about your business, then depending how passionate you are, you might not want to accept it and that's also another trouble that we have with data, that sometimes people don't want to accept what certain data is clearly trying to tell. But well, we are humans, right?

[00:25:17] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:25:17] That's what keeps it fun and exciting finding those answers.

[00:25:20] **Gary Ilyes:** [00:25:20] OK, we have very different definition of fun. How about inclusivity? Do you have any interesting data or anecdotes about the gender gap in SEO or conferences that you've been running?

[00:25:35] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:25:35] I do. A number of years ago, when it first became an extremely noticeable problem in search conferences that there were a lot of manuals, there weren't a lot of women on sessions, and things and presenters and keynotes in particular.

[00:25:52] I had a lot of data that I could look at from our decade of producing conferences and multiple conferences a year. And so what I focused on was the data we received in pitches, so we would have people pitch to speak. So I analyzed all of the pitches we got by gender, and then the acceptance rates and the diversity of our panels and our sessions and everything actually tracked, because as it turned out, we would only receive for every two or three pitches from a man would be one pitch from a woman.

[00:26:26] And we ended up having about 30% female, 70% male panels, so it was a problem because how do you encourage people to put themselves out there more, and how do you solve for the challenges that might exist that might be unique to minorities and underrepresented communities that are, maybe, not to the folks that we would see pitching regularly? Like how do you address what oftentimes is inequity in the ability to travel and the ability to be sent to or pay for a conference appearance? All of that matters as well as how you're selecting and how you're sourcing your speakers.

[00:27:01] **Gary Illyes:** [00:27:01] I think that actually got much better. And I remember that it was a conference in Seattle. I think you were the one of the organizers, and I remember this conference specifically because it hit me that this is a nice change because the two other panelists on stage were women and I was the third one, and I was the only guy there. And it felt somehow great. I never realized before that it was the other way usually, and I was just sitting there like a pumpkin as usual, and then suddenly it was different and then it made me realize more consciously that this is a problem and it's being fixed by the conference organizers. However, I don't actually know what was employed to to fix this gap or how were you trying to fix this.

[00:25:35] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:25:35] Intentionality. You have to be intentional. You have to be eyes on it, you have to not expect it to happen naturally; you have to be intentional. I know which panels you were talking about and that's what it was. It was intentionality.

[00:28:01]

Lizzi Sassman: [00:28:01] Was it anything that you did to get more submissions like the pitch number or the selection process, or across the board, things that you changed in order to make the panels more inclusive?

[00:28:14] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:28:14] So we did change the pitch process a bit. In that we would give feedback, we'd get a pitch. And I could look at a pitch and see that this is not a very strong pitch, but I can understand what they're trying to get at. And these few changes and adding this would make this a stronger session, so I would reach back out to that person and suggest these changes or focus it this way or let's look at this, as well as just reaching out to people and saying, "you know, we'd like you to speak, can you pitch? You know what you're doing, you're talented, go ahead and pitch."

[00:28:47] A lot of people feel like it's almost a Catch-22. People think, "Well, I'm never going to get selected for a session, because nobody knows me." But nobody knows me because I've never appeared anywhere. And so at some point, you have to put yourself out there and that can be very hard. But I also think a good place to start for people looking to raise their profile, get some speaking arrangements, I would suggest go to conferences and meet people. Don't go necessarily expecting you're going to learn a ton, but try and network. Just be really effective at meeting people. Walk up to somebody that you respect in the industry and say, "Could you spend some time with me? I'm looking for a mentor." I've found that most people in this industry are incredibly giving of themselves and their time and are actively engaged in that kind of mentorship and sponsorship. Anyway, so find those people.

[00:29:39] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:29:39] Would you say that your goal is to speak at a conference and "Please help me get there" when you are reaching out to find a mentor? Would you be targeted or would you recommend that people be specific about their goal in order to find a good match with a mentor?

[00:29:55] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:29:55] I'd suggest people find a mentor just for their career pathing in general. And whether that's internal where they work or if that's within an industry group or meeting someone networking. I don't think that speaking has to be a goal. I don't think that becoming a celebrity in SEO necessarily is a goal. I mean for some it is and that's fine, but I just think it's more about your career development. And SEO is a really interesting space, because there are a lot of different ways to get at an answer. There are a lot of different ways to get at a solution to a problem. And the more experience you have to people who have had diverse experiences working on different types of sites, working with different and

within different verticals--even the approaches can be wildly different.

[00:30:44] So the more exposure you get to those differences, the stronger you're going to be as an SEO. So I think it's more in service of making you stronger in your craft. And if as a side benefit, you end up on a stage, that's great, but I would suggest just for your own notification.

[00:31:01] **Gary Illyes:** [00:31:01] Well, I think that was a wonderful way to wrap this up. It was the motivation that everyone needed, definitely me.

[00:31:12] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:31:12] You're going to get out there and start speaking now, Gary.

[00:31:14] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:31:14] No, he's going to get a mentor. The call to action was get a mentor. I need to be mentored, I need advice in my life direction.

[00:31:23] **Gary Illyes:** [00:31:23] Yeah, Lizzie, we have to talk.

[00:31:24] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:31:24] Oh, no! [laughter]

[00:31:27] **Gary Illyes:** [00:31:27] If people wanted to find you, where can they find you?

[00:31:30] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:31:30] Twitter, at MichelleRobbins. Also on LinkedIn, too.

[00:31:33] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:31:33] Do you post on LinkedIn?

[00:31:35] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:31:35] Now and again.

[00:31:36] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:31:36] All right. We will put the links in the description of the episode, so you can find Michelle.

[00:31:42] **Gary Illyes:** [00:31:42] And we are going to mention you in the tweet on Twitter. And with that, thank you for joining us here, Michelle. It was great having you.

[00:31:51] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:31:51] Thanks so much for having me. This was a lot of fun.

[00:31:55] ♪ [music] ♪

[00:31:57] **Gary Illyes:** [00:31:57] Next time on Search Off the Record, we are going to talk about UX and SEO, probably with Martin. We've been having fun with these podcast episodes. I hope you the listener have found them both entertaining and insightful too. Feel free to drop us a note on Twitter at @googlesearchc or chat with us at one of the next events we go to if you have any thoughts. And of course, don't forget to "like" and "subscribe." And finally, thank you folks for listening. Goodbye.

[00:32:25] **Lizzi Sassman:** [00:32:25] Until next time.

[00:32:26] **Michelle Robbins:** [00:32:26] Bye, folks!

[00:32:28] ♪ [music] ♪