From underdog to SEO Champion: The road to 192% growth

Introduction

Van der Garde became a customer of valantic in the spring of 2020 because they wanted to make a big step in their online discoverability. Their ambition, as with almost every SEO customer, was to get as many high-ranking positions in Google as possible.

But how do you manage that as a smaller player in one of the most competitive industries? Van der Garde is definitely a specialist in outdoor furniture, but also a relatively small family business that competes online with parties that all have much higher budgets:

1. **Outdoor furniture specialists** such as Tuinland and Kees Smit.

2. **Large traditional Home Shopping chains** that have a good reputation within the outdoor furniture segment, such as a Leen Bakker, Fonq, VidaXL and JYSK.

3. **Garden specialists** such as Intratuin and Fonteyn.

4. **DIY stores** such as Praxis, Gamma and Karwei.

And as if the challenge wasn't big enough, many of these parties began placing extra emphasis on their online outdoor furniture assortment. In other words, the already competitive playing field became even more competitive. This showed, among other things, the huge expansion of the product assortment on the websites

Example 1 - VidaXL

VidaXL October 2020 - 3.137 outdoor furniture

(Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20201001041845/https://www.vidaxl.nl/g/4299/tuinmeubelen)

VidaXL March 2023 - 16.701 outdoor furniture (+432%)

(Source: https://www.vidaxl.nl/g/4299/tuinmeubelen)

Example 2 - FonQ

FonQ April 2019 - 353 lounge sets
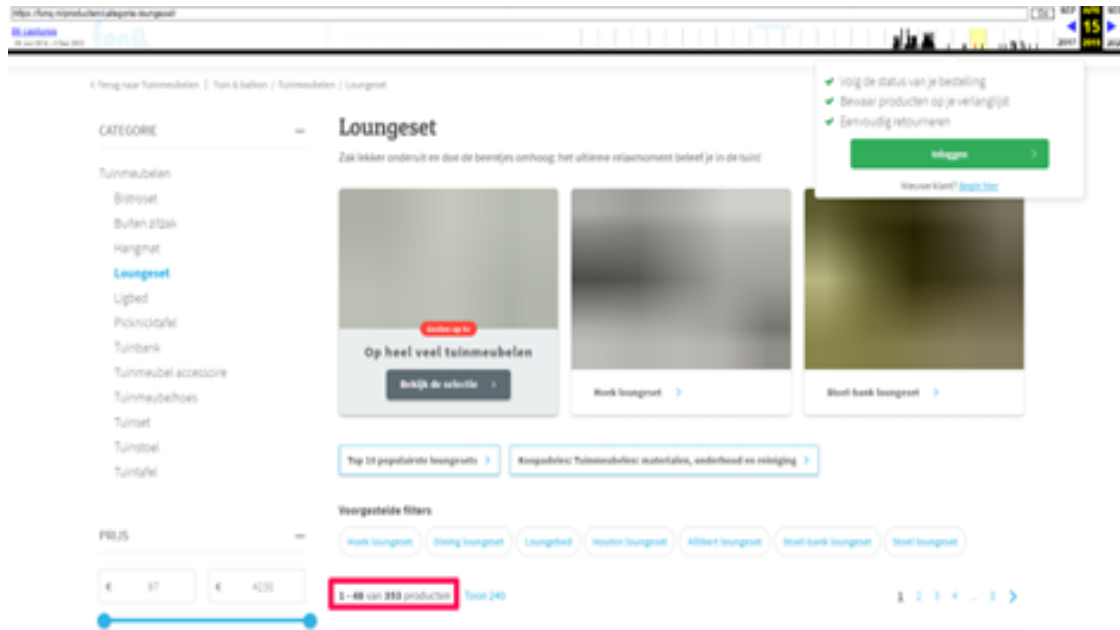
FonQ March 2023 - 2146 lounge sets (+507%)
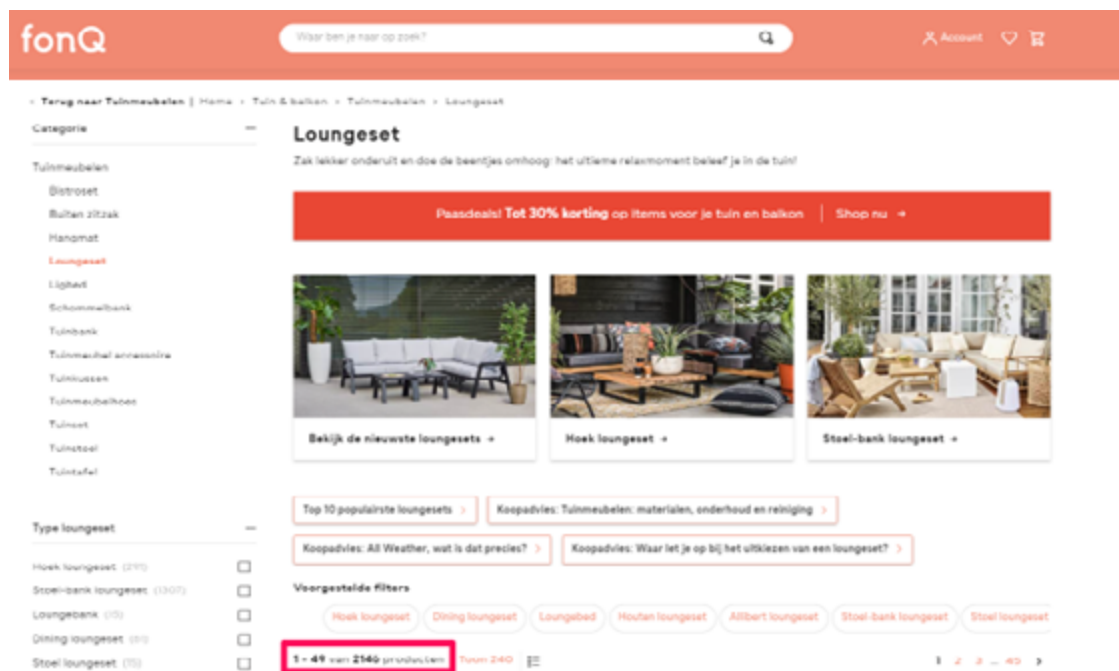
Example 3 - Praxis

Praxis May 2020 - 756 outdoor furniture

(Source: https://web.archive.org/web/20200516231249/https:/www.praxis.nl/tuin-buitenleven/tuinmeubelen/g48/
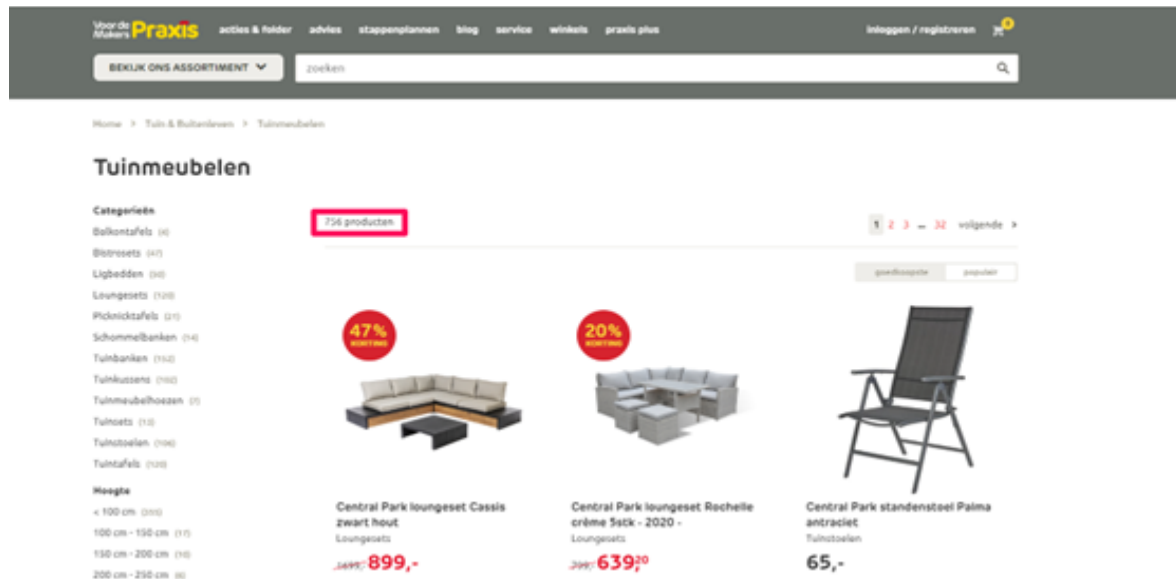
Praxis March 2023 - 3774 outdoor furniture (+399%)

(Source: https://www.praxis.nl/tuin-buitenleven/tuinmeubelen/g48/

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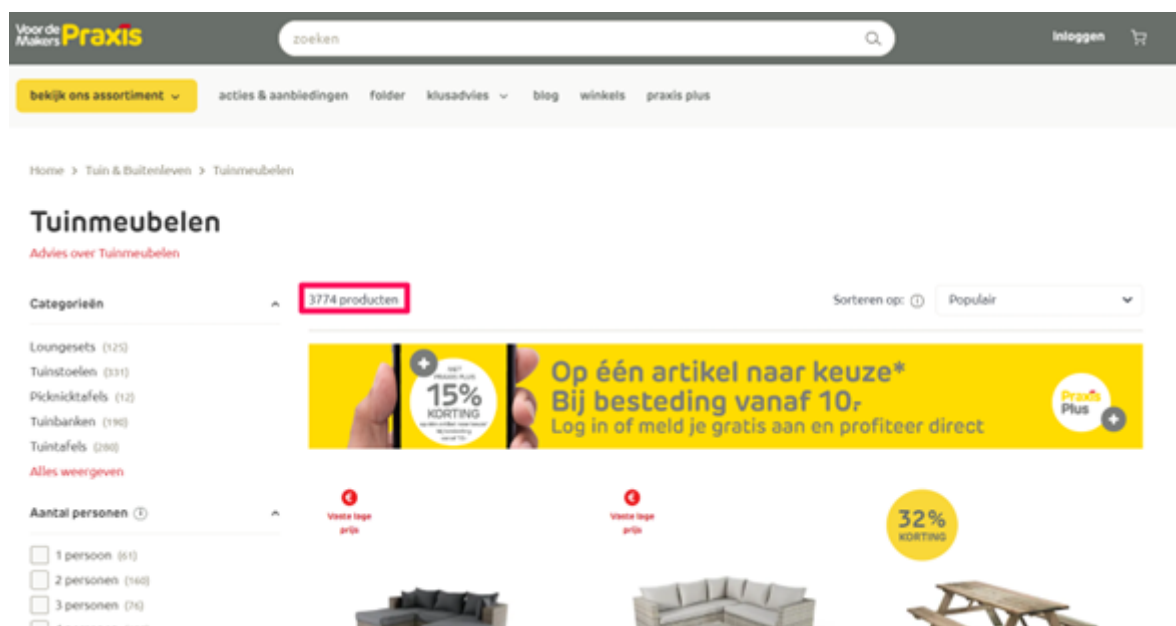
Start of the collaboration 2020

Van der Garde's peak season picks up slowly starting in January and really takes off from March, based on when the summer weather arrives.

The high season usually continues through September, depending on how warm the late summer is. The SEO process started in May 2020 and towards the high season, we achieved great results.

We saw an increase in key search terms (lounge set, garden set, etc.) after a few months. By the end of the peak season (August/September) we started to enter the top 5.

The enthusiasm soon turned into disappointment. Simultaneously with the 2020 December Core Update, we began to slowly sink, from February onwards things went into overdrive. We had lost all positions and dropped even further.

Season 2020/2021

A comprehensive competitive analysis followed the December 2020 Core Update, and literally every letter and kilobyte of vdgarde.nl was analyzed. The drop seemed unfair and highly illogical: We concluded that, while there were several areas for improvement on the website, the website was certainly not less optimized than competitors outside the top 5. As of August 2021, Van der Garde scaled its internal capacity, and we started working twice as hard to implement all the SEO points in the roadmap.

The hypothesis

In the months following August 2021, recovery occurred at lightning speed and after 2–3 months of hard work, we were back to our old level. There was euphoria at Van der Garde. At valantic we were happy, but also surprised that it picked up so quickly.

We critically evaluated the situation and tentatively came up with a hypothesis at the annual roadmap meeting with Van der Garde in November 2021.

"As good as we are doing and as much as we want to claim credit for this rise, we foresee a possible 'doomsday scenario.'

If we start losing positions again around the start of the high season (December 2021 / January 2022), we will see this as a confirmation of our hypothesis.

Namely, that the increases and decreases are a seasonal trend caused by lack of brand awareness compared to the competition."

The hypothesis was also underpinned by a competitive analysis of the brand demand of 15 competitors vs. the brand demand for Van der Garde, and the non-branded search market. Thus, we knew that Van der Garde had the second-lowest brand demand, and that compared to its competitors, there had been no percentual improvement here either.

Confirmation of the hypothesis

Two weeks after the roadmap meeting, positions began to sink, and in January 2022, the rate of descent accelerated again as it did in 2021.

Both we and Van der Garde were convinced of the hypothesis. Investment in a branding strategy was made shortly thereafter, and starting in 2022, the first branding campaigns were tested in the off-season before scaling up in the 2022 peak season.

The only bright spot was that we dropped significantly less than in 2021. We did about 20% better in terms of average positions, so finishing the SEO priorities had clearly had an effect.

That our efforts paid off was also shown by how we performed on the mid- and long-tail search terms (short-tail is for example „lounge set", mid- and long-tail are more specific search terms like „Lounge set 6 persons"). This is where we performed better and more stable than ever before.

And even though the search market in 2022 was down a lot from 2021 (corona), where the first half of the year was plagued by lockdowns, shopping by appointment and „click & collect,“ we created much more visibility on this long-tail, and a roughly equal number of clicks.

The increase toward high season 2023

Throughout 2022, we continued to rocket ahead on the SEO roadmap while also scaling up branding efforts. A higher bottom line was achieved on short-tail.

In December 2022, there were 2 new major updates, fully in line with our SEO vision and expectations for 2023 that we published a month earlier (Download our 2023 trend report here (Dutch)).

They were the Link Spam Update (aimed against buying backlinks) and the Helpful Content Update (aimed at rewarding websites with truly quality, value-added content).

From one day to the next, both long-tail and short-tail positions skyrocketed.

The Link Spam update in particular made an impact. According our point of view, because Van der Garde was better optimized than its competitors in all areas, Van der Garde was only lagging on domain authority and name recognition of competitors due to higher budgets. Domain authority was suddenly weighted differently by these updates.

Example: Garden furniture

Example: Lounge sets

Result: High season 2023

High season 2023 has just begun and by now it is clear that brand awareness once again plays an important role: The correlation between increase in impressions and the unstable average positions on the short-tail speaks volumes.

However, it does become strongly apparent that for the second year in a row, the bottom line has gone up (significantly).

Example: Garden furniture
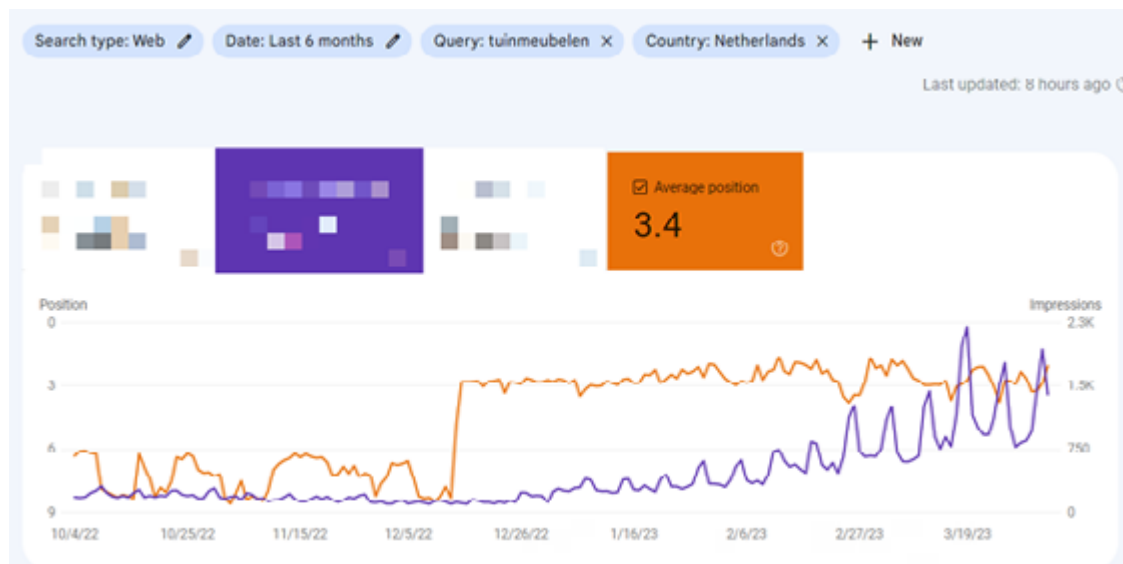
Example: Lounge sets
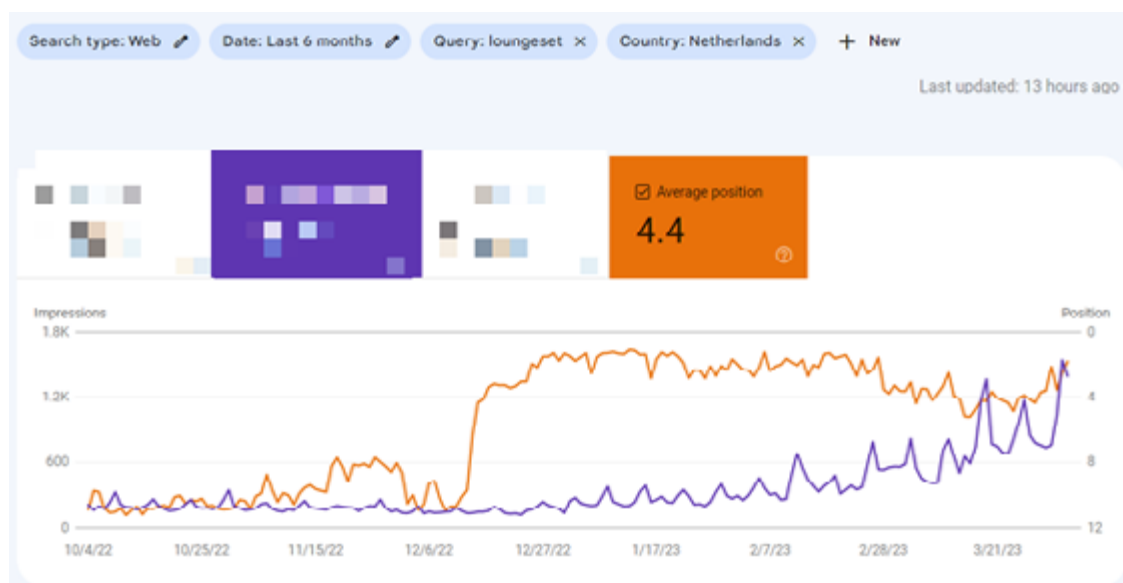
Average positions of the whole short-tail

Average positions have never been higher, topping out at 2.7 in December 2022. The downward trend on highly competitive search terms in the peak season is still there, but with a much higher bottom line.

In June 2021, the average position was 11, in June 2022 9.7 and in June 2023 6.5. The keyword set has not changed otherwise.

The result is that people who searched for the short-tail keywords in June 2023 were on average 2x more likely to click on Van der Garde than in 2022:

The CTR increased to 1.5%, where it was still at 0.7% in June 2022 and 0.8% in June 2021.

On the total Non-branded dataset of over 100,000 keywords, we saw a 192.2% growth in SEO clicks in June 2023 compared to June 2022 and even a 54% growth compared to the Corona years 2021 (54% growth) and 2020 (7% growth).

Year-to-date (January to June), Van der Garde has a growth rate of:
+77.32% vs. 2022
+14.76% vs. 2021
+21.70% vs. 2020

How impressive these results are becomes clear when we look at the graph of the non-branded search market in the Google Ads Keyword Planner.

In this we see the following figures year-to-date (January through May, June 2023 is not yet available) compared to 2023:
-10% vs. 2022
-35.1% vs. 2021
-34.29% vs. 2020
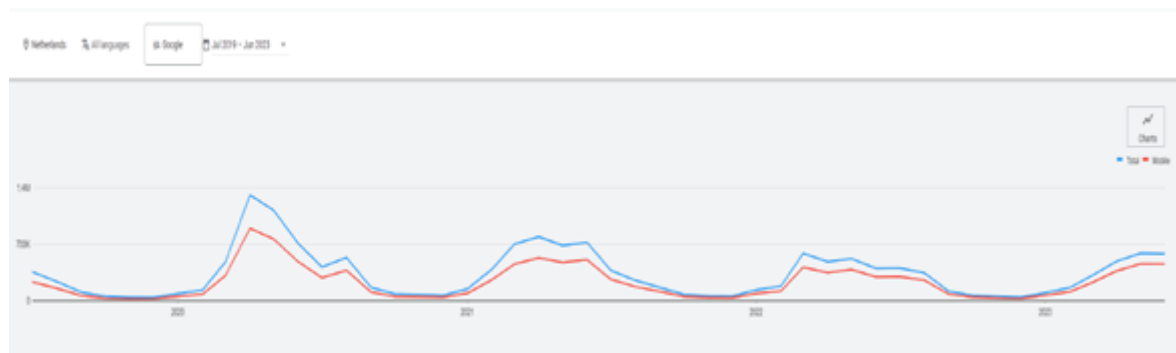
This result was achieved because Van der Garde can now rank much better structurally, and also on a much larger keyword set.

Branding (January to May, compared with 2022 and 2021)

We benchmarked search demand for Van der Garde against 15 competitors and the non-branded search market. All data relates exclusively to the outdoor furniture industry.

We used the brand name with outdoor furniture search terms (van der Garde lounge set, e.g.).

In the specific case of the outdoor furniture specialists (Van der Garde, Tuinmeubelshop, Tuinmeubelselland, etc.), we also included brand search terms without outdoor furniture keywords in them (Van der Garde e.g.), since this brand query is 100% related to the Outdoor Furniture industry.

Over the period June 2020 to May 2021, there were only 3 competitors with lower brand demand than Van der Garde. Over the same period in 2022/2023, Van der Garde overtook 2 more competitors.

The Outdoor Furniture industry experienced a 30.76% drop in Non-branded search demand during this period, with demand for the Van der Garde brand only dropping 17.67%.

Our online advertising team contributed to the fulfillment of Van der Garde's branding strategy during 2022 and 2023.

Compared to 2022, a 127% growth in conversion value was realized between March 2023 and June 2023. For this, 57% more budget was spent, but in return they achieved a 44% ROAS improvement.

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Development of the Brand Index

Development of the Brand Index, Van der Garde vs SEO competitors
Period: 06/2022 - 05/2023 compared to 06/2021 - 05/2022
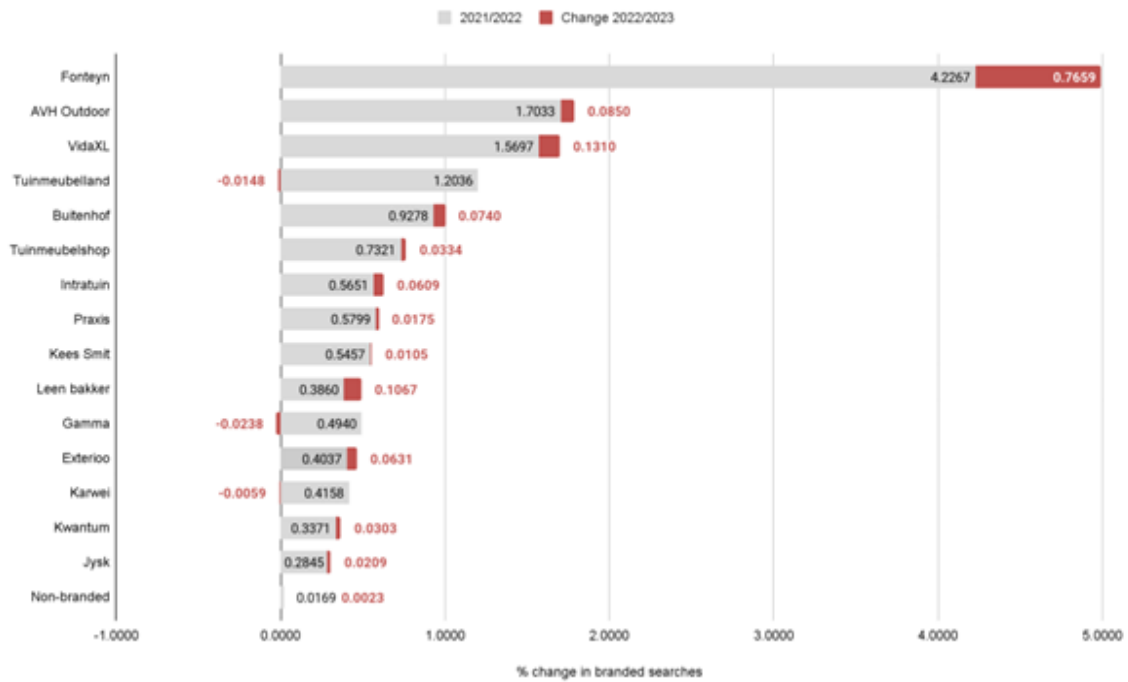
That Van der Garde is under/overperforming relative to its competitors can be seen in our Brand Index. A number above 1 means Van der Garde is doing better, a number below 1 means the competitor is doing better.

- That Fonteyn is at 4,2267 means that the brand demand for Van der Garde is 4,2267x as large within the Outdoor Furniture industry.

- That Non-Branded is at 0.0169 means that the brand demand for Van der Garde is the same size as 0.0169% of the Non-branded search market within the Outdoor Furniture industry.

In red, we show the 2022/2023 change from the 2021/2022 index. An interesting insight here is that the Van der Garde brand has developed more positively than overall demand for outdoor furniture (Non-branded search market development).

Key takeaways

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Data retention = key

The power of historical data (within SEO) cannot be underestimated. There are many SEO tools, but Google Search Console is what Google Analytics is to many. It is our holy grail, our best "source of truth," and this very source has a limited data retention of up to 16 months.

The trend development so clearly confirmed in this case was a lot harder, if not impossible to make without historical Google Search Console data. For this we use Ryte, an SEO tool that stores the GSC data in Big Query and then allows segmentation within it.

Align on a long-term vision

An SEO'er should clearly understand where he/she wants to go with the project. By this, we do not mean a priority list for the next 4 or 5 months, but a real vision of SEO and a vision of what he/she is working towards for the next 1–2 years.

It is important that all stakeholders in the trajectory have confidence in this and that it matches the ambitions and resources made available for the trajectory. In the Van der Garde trajectory, the ambitions were too high in the beginning when compared to the size of the challenge and the available resources.

To achieve a good result, you have to make choices, keep talking about the expectations (especially when things get exciting) and ultimately have patience.

The impact of search trends and brand demand

One of the ranking factors within SEO is the intent behind a keyword. When (relatively speaking) many people search for "Lounge set + Van der Garde," that's a signal that Van der Garde's Lounge sets page will be a relevant search result for many people looking for a Lounge set.

That brand awareness has impact is obvious, but usually having a well-optimized website is much more important. However, as mentioned, Van der Garde is a smaller player in terms of name, and the difference in search volume between high season and low season is extreme: Relative to the low point of the search trend, there is a tenfold increase toward the peak of the high season.

From the beginning of the high season, the larger parties (Leen Bakker, Kees Smit, Jysk, etc.) also go full throttle on media such as TV advertising, so the search demand for their brand (Jysk Lounge set) attracts even more volume relatively speaking.

Impact on short-tail terms

Impact on long-tail terms

A word from Van der Garde

Like any client, you would like to quickly claim organic positions. If these results are not forthcoming, you want to try all sorts of ways to still achieve this.

It was not always easy to keep believing in the SEO vision and chosen strategy when we were sinking towards the high season. However, Nick did not let himself be swayed and we continued to make the right choices with a long-term view.

In the end, this ensured an outstanding result. It was nice to stick to the chosen vision. The SEO strategy was also broader than just the traditional SEO pillars.
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