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Why organic search is flat for a year — then hooks

The flat first year of a good SEO programme isn't nothing happening. It's rank accruing below the line where clicks live. Organic compounds as a step, not a ramp — because clicks are a threshold function of position — and that changes what you should be watching.

There's a chart I show almost every prospect: sixteen months of organic clicks for a glazing repair business. Flat for twelve months — noisy, unremarkable, the kind of line that makes a nervous client ask what they're paying for. Then, around month thirteen, it breaks upward and doesn't stop. The last quarter is roughly five times the same quarter a year earlier.

Everyone reads that shape as "be patient, it compounds." True — and useless, because it asks the client to fund a year of pure faith. The useful thing is the *reason* the curve is a step and not a ramp. Once you know it, the flat year stops being an act of faith and becomes something you can actually watch move.

You're buying rank you can't see

Here's what's happening in the flat year. Your rankings *are* improving — measurably, the whole time. In that glazing account, average position climbed from around 46 to around 24 across the window. That's real, monotonic progress. But position 46 and position 24 earn almost exactly the same number of clicks: roughly none. Clicks don't accrue smoothly with rank. They're a **threshold function** of it — the click-through curve is nearly flat across page five, page four, the bottom of page two, then rises steeply only as you cross onto page one.

So for a year you are accumulating rank in the region where rank doesn't yet pay. The work is landing; it's just landing below the waterline. Then a cluster of your pages crosses the page-two-to-page-one threshold at roughly the same time — because they were built together and matured together — and the click line doesn't ramp, it *hooks*, because a whole network crossed the paying line at once.

That's the compounding, mechanically. Not "trust me, it's accruing." It's rank you can watch accruing on a chart, converting to clicks all at once when it finally crosses the line where clicks live.

Why it's an asset and paid isn't

This is the real difference from paid, and it's sharper than "rent versus own." Paid is a tap: the thousandth pound buys about the same click as the first, and the day the card declines, the traffic is zero. Rank below the fold is an asset under construction — position you've earned and now hold, whether or not it's paying clicks yet. And unlike the tap, it makes the *next* page cheaper: a page landing on an established, credible network crosses the threshold faster than the first page did, because the engine already trusts the source. Paid gets more expensive as you scale into competition; organic gets cheaper as your authority deepens.

The honest version

Two caveats, because the fairy-tale version of this gets sold far too often.

First, it is not immune to algorithm updates. A core update can knock a well-built site back a notch — in one recent quarter, three of the accounts I watch dipped through one. The difference is that coverage-built rankings tend to recover and keep climbing where thin ones get reset. Durability is not invulnerability, and anyone who promises the latter is selling something.

Second, the asset only compounds while someone keeps holding it — keeps shipping, keeps the context intact. Stop feeding the network, or hand it between vendors who each relearn it from scratch, and the compounding doesn't pause. It decays. “Once it's built, it's yours” is true only for as long as you keep building.

So the sale was never “fund a mystery for a year.” It's “fund a leading indicator you can watch.” Position moves first; clicks are the lagging confirmation. A programme that's working shows it in rank long before it shows it in traffic — which means the flat year isn't flat at all, if you're looking at the right line.

The field study shows the curve — and the position line underneath it — with sixteen months of real Search Console data, including the accounts still below the waterline.

WRITTEN BY PHIL YARROW · about

You are buying rank you cannot see.

Position leads, clicks lag — the curve is a step, not a ramp. See it with sixteen months of real data at pyc.agency, or book a teardown.

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