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INCREASE ONLINE SALES BY IMPROVING ECOMMERCE SITE SEARCH

Online retailers can reduce abandons and increase conversions by meeting customer demand for accurate, relevant website searches.

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Summary

The role of search in business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-consumer (B2C) web marketing strategies has evolved rapidly over the last few decades, becoming a multi-billion dollar[1] information technology industry unto itself. Innovations in search and navigation technologies are driving companies to increase their search budgets, and consumers' expectations for fast, accurate, relevant searches on websites they shop are increasing. The pressure is on all online sellers to ensure that their ecommerce sites keep pace.

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[1] "U.S. Online Retail Forecast, 2011 to 2016," Forrester Research, Dec. 2012.

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The Evolving Role of Search

Recently, the role of search has expanded to include videos and data on social networks.

As the Internet has continued to expand in size and complexity over the last few decades, so too has the role of search. Although the multi-billion dollar U.S. Search market is considered mature, it continues to grow at impressive rates. In 2011, it posted an 11% increase, driven by a 3% uptick in unique searchers and a 7% gain in the average number of searches per searcher.[2] This rise in search behavior correlates with the increased amount of time consumers are spending online, and demonstrates that consumers are relying heavily on Internet searches to help them find the products, services, and information they want online.

With search intensity increasing, it is not surprising that mid- to large-size companies and enterprises are designating larger amounts of their web budgets to site search deployments.[3] For years, marketers have focused search efforts on search engine optimization (SEO), optimizing their websites to improve search results achieved on the primary search engines, most notably Google. Recently, the role of search has expanded to include videos and data on social networks. Meanwhile, Google has become the hands-down leader in digital search; forcing marketing and web professionals to continually evolve their SEO strategies in reaction to Google's ever-changing search algorithms and new technologies.

As search becomes more complex, and Google increases its market share and control over search results, it is understandable for online sellers to feel underpowered when it comes to Internet search. Fortunately, there is an extremely important aspect of search that online sellers can control and use to improve their business performance—the search capabilities of the ecommerce sites themselves.

[2] "US Digital Future in Focus 2012," comScore, Feb. 2012.
[3] "Site Search Evolves from Technical Feature to Customer Touchpoint," Forrester Group, Sept. 2012.

Customer Behavior
& Product Discovery

Once visitors arrive on a website, they spend an average of 10 seconds or less deciding whether or not to remain on the site.[4] If you succeed in clearly communicating your value proposition within this ultra-short timeframe, the subset of visitors who are interested by the value proposition may reward you by staying a little longer. In the next 30 seconds or so, these potential customers will make judgments on the relevancy of your website's content and the usability of the site itself. They will scan the images and messages. Glance at navigation categories. And with any luck, begin to type keywords directly into the site search box or drill down through the navigation hoping to discover whatever product or service they're seeking.

It is in this product discovery phase that opportunities for business improvement exist for online sellers. Some ecommerce websites don't contain any search capabilities. For those that do, the quality, speed, and accuracy of site searches vary widely. Generally speaking, most ecommerce websites today do a poor job with site search. Perhaps this is because many sellers are focused primarily on website content and driving traffic to their site, and fail to consider how customers actually experience the content.

[4] "How Long Do Users Stay on Web Pages?" Neilson Norman Group, Sept. 2011.

Customer Behavior
& Product Discovery Continued

Online buyers today are more tech savvy and have far greater expectations than they did several years ago.

The importance of providing positive, relevant customer experiences—including site searches—cannot be overemphasized. Online buyers today are more tech savvy and have far greater expectations than they did several years ago. When it comes to product discovery, they value and demand relevancy, personalization, and ease of use. A recent study revealed that 59% of consumers believe that online retailers who personalize the shopping experience make it easier for them to find the products that are most interesting to them, and 54% feel that retailers who personalize the shopping experience provide a valuable service.[5] This indicates that if your ecommerce website is not making the product discovery process relevant and personalized, you are disappointing a majority of site visitors and missing out on potential sales.

Ecommerce websites that enable customers to find relevant products and services faster and without hassle are rewarded with greater conversions, more repeat customers, and fewer abandons. In comparison, websites that fail to provide user-friendly, relevant browsing and search results are especially vulnerable to abandons. In fact, 33% of consumers report leaving a website because they found it hard to browse the products.[6] The impact of this on the seller extends beyond the initial abandonments. Customers who experience difficulty searching for and locating the products/services they want on your site are unlikely to return any time soon. After all, countless other ecommerce websites that offer similar (if not the same) products and services are just a few clicks away.

[5,6] "How Multi-Channel Personalization Impacts Shopper Attitudes and Buying Behavior" study conducted by eTailing Group and MyBuys, 2012.

Improving Your Ecommerce Site Search

Incorporating dynamic search functionality into your ecommerce website can help you deliver the quick, relevant search results and personalized shopping experiences today's sophisticated customers demand. Following are descriptions of notable site search capabilities that are available today. Incorporating these into your ecommerce website can help you enrich the customer shopping experience, improve your merchandising, and increase conversions.

Type Ahead & Suggested Search Increase Usability

With type ahead technology, product names and categories that are similar to keywords being typed by the customer are automatically displayed in a drop-down box as the customer types. This improves the shopping experience by: 1) allowing customers to quickly spot and click on keyword phrases without typing them in full, speeding their search; 2) suggesting correct spellings of product names and attributes, helping eliminate search errors caused by misspellings; and 3) providing relevant search suggestions that the customer may not have considered, increasing the potential for up-sells and cross-sells.

Full Text Search Removes Search Barriers

According to a study conducted by eTailing Group, 71% of online shoppers believe that keyword searches are helpful in shaping their online purchase decisions.[7] With so many shoppers relying on keyword searches, it is vital that your website is capable of searching full text product descriptions as well as product names, categories, and SKUs. This allows customers who know specific features or characteristics of a product to search on keywords that describe the product, without requiring them to know the exact product name. Customers experience a more natural, robust, user-friendly product search—much like the Google searches to which they have grown accustomed.

[7] "The Multi-Channel Shopping Transformation Study," eTailing Group, 2006.

Improving Your Ecommerce
Site Search Continued

67% of consumers say that they are confident and ready to make a purchase once they have found the right product.

Faceted Navigation Enables Fast, Relevant Searching

Faceted navigation gives shoppers the ability to narrow their searches by specific product facets, or attributes. As the online seller, you determine the quantity and types of attributes relevant to each product category. For example, a website that sells work shoes might allow customers to search on facets such as men's/women's, type of work, size, style, color, price, and brand—allowing them to narrow their search from thousands of products to just a few in a matter of seconds. 67% of consumers say that they are confident and ready to make a purchase once they have found the right product.[8]   By rapidly filtering out irrelevant product options, you connect customers with their "right products" faster, increasing the speed and likelihood of conversion.

Filtering & Attribute Boosting for Increased Control

Your ecommerce website solution should allow you to customize and manage site search rankings and search results page. Review where and how your search results are displayed on the screen, and fine tune as needed. Including images with search results can be helpful to customers. As part of your merchandising strategy, you should also set search filtering options to favor specific products and attributes. This allows you to boost rankings of items you're promoting and/or have targeted for inventory reduction. But beware: including too many featured products or advertisements at the top of the results list can negatively impact customer perceptions of the usefulness and relevancy of the search. The key in controlling search results is giving your customers more than what they expected, while still keeping it relevant.

[8] "How Multi-Channel Personalization Impacts Shopper Attitudes and Buying Behavior" study conducted by eTailing Group and MyBuys, 2012.
[7] Gartner, Inc., gartner.com/newsroom/id/1826814, Oct. 19, 2011.

Conclusion

Today's online consumers use search extensively to help them quickly locate information, products and services they're interested in. Advances in search technologies have made searching for relevant information faster, easier, and more intuitive than it has been in the past. This has significantly raised the expectations of customers as they browse and shop on ecommerce websites. Znode Multifront® is a flexible, scalable advanced ecommerce website platform that includes innovative search and navigation capabilities that allow you to fully customize the search and shopping experience, enabling you to meet customer expectations, reduce abandons, and increase conversions.

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