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Site Search Increases Conversion Rates, Average Order Value And Loyalty

MANY BENEFITS TO ADDING SITE SEARCH TO YOUR ONLINE STORE

BY DAVE YOUNG



If your online store has hundreds of products, you may want to consider implementing a more sophisticated site search to help your customers find what they need quickly. For those of you running shops with an inventory of less than 500 products, you may only need to make sure your navigation has been designed effectively. But for shops with 500 or more products, an advanced site search solution will help you in many ways, including increasing revenues.

There are several factors in determining whether your site should utilize the features of a site search solution. The main factor is the size of your product catalog. "The more SKUs a storefront has, the more difficult it is for shoppers to find the right products," said Joe Lichtman, director of retail product management for FAST, which develops advanced search technology solutions. "Advanced site search with dynamic navigation helps shoppers quickly sift through thousands of products in just a few clicks."

Large multichannel retailers, in particular, can benefit from deploying a single search and information access platform across their extended organization. "These organizations have a variety of search needs, including in-store kiosk search, mobile search for in-store workers, call-center search, search to mine customer intelligence and more," Lichtman said. In addition, he also suggested that by choosing

a single search platform to address all of these search requirements, as well as the online storefront, large multichannel retailers can gain economies of scale and enjoy true return on investment.

By implementing an advanced and finely-tuned site search solution, retailers can benefit by experiencing increased conversion rates, increased average order value and increased loyalty. Advanced site search helps shoppers narrow down their selection quickly, increasing the likelihood they will make a purchase. Merchants can also utilize site search to cross-sell related products to users as they search for products on the site, which can potentially increase average order value. And by offering highly personalized search and recommendations to a specific shopper, advanced site search can help increase customer loyalty.

"Quality ecommerce site search has been known to dramatically increase conversion rates," said Kevin Lindsay, marketing director of Mercado Software. Mercado clients have reported an increase of 50 percent to 100 percent in conversion rates, and up

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to 300 percent in site search use by implementing an advanced site search solution. Lindsay said the best way to keep people from abandoning a site is to address all the ecommerce-specific search issues and offer merchandising capabilities that allow retailers to showcase specific brands; promote clearance, high margin or surplus items; use metrics, such as conversion rates and revenue to drive merchandising rules; and to conduct multivariate testing on promotions.

Even if you currently have a site search in place through your shopping cart system, it could be too basic and may not have the capability to handle spell correction, fuzzy matching or data analytics. According to Sanjay Arora, founder and CEO of Nextopia, a Toronto based ecommerce search and navigation solutions company, many existing search functions in shopping carts yield "Sorry, no matches found" for products that are actually carried. "Poor results equals lost sales — it's that simple," Arora said. "People often do not have the time or patience to try different variations of search keywords and phrases and ultimately abandon the site altogether." And many merchants do use home-grown search engines that are not scalable or customizable, equating to frustrated customers and potentially significant revenue losses.

"If site visitors can find what they are looking for quickly and easily, they are more likely to purchase," said Shaun Ryan, CEO of SLI Systems, which develop intelligent search services based on customer search behavior. According to Ryan, if customers are shopping at a site and cannot find what they need within a few minutes, they are more likely to abandon the process and try another site. "Having an advanced site search solution that literally learns the behavior of your customers and quickly identifies the products they are looking for, allows you to increase conversion rates, customer retention and overall customer satisfaction."

The cost of implementing site search on ecommerce sites can vary dramatically. "It depends on whether a retailer wants to subscribe to a hosted search service or license a search software solution that can be customized to bundle its specific business requirements," Mercado's Lindsay said. As an example, a more affordable solution can be purchased and implemented from Nextopia starting at around \$1,000 annually. "Our ecommerce site search is the most affordable on the market," Nextopia's Arora said.

"Regardless of price it is important to identify what solutions fit your specific needs and to make sure you understand what you will receive based on the investment dollars you put into it," SLI's Ryan said.

Large retailers should consider choosing a search vendor who can scale its solution easily to avoid significant hardware expenses. "If an online retailer chooses to deploy a search solu-

tion as an integrated component of its online storefront, hardware costs, professional service fees and maintenance costs also may apply to the overall cost," FAST's Lichtman said. Additionally, if a site chooses to purchase site search as a hosted service, monthly service costs also need to be taken into consideration.

The best thing you can do for your online store is to search for products yourself as if you are a customer and study the results. If you are unable to find your own products, imagine how frustrated your customers are when searching on your site. Implement an advanced site search solution to help increase your revenues and customer loyalty. ■

SITE SEARCH VENDORS

FAST
Fastsearch.com

Mercado
Mercado.com

Nextopia
Nextopia.com

SLI Systems
Sli-systems.com

Endeca
Endeca.com

EasyAsk
Easyask.com

Celebros
Celebros.com

SITE SEARCH EFFECTIVE, AFTER A SECOND TRY

"We were using the site search function that came with our shopping cart. It did not work well for us and we were not pleased. Then, in the fall of 2006, we switched to SLI, an independent site search vendor. We have been very pleased since then.

We sell roughly 1,000 styles of hats on our site. We made several changes to our site at about the same time as adding the new site search vendor. I know that these changes, which include the new site search, have increased overall revenues, as well as our average ticket size and our conversion rate.

SLI has good tools to help us manage the search function, and they've been very responsive."

Fred Belinsky
Villagehatshop.com

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