

Site search best practices:

Improving the way people buy online

By SLI Systems and Fifth Gear

Overview

On Main Street and in shopping centers around the country, retailers can promote items by placing them in prime locations, consumers can see products up close and personal, and customers also have store clerks to help them find what they're looking for. For online retailers, however, linking customers with the products they want to buy poses more of a challenge.

The word "search" in many people's minds commonly refers to general web search using search engines like Google, Bing or Yahoo, to find information or a particular website. But getting people to the site is only half of the challenge - once they're there, what must retailers do to help them find the products they are looking for and get them to buy? That's where the search function within a website - "site-search" - comes in to play. As businesses begin to concentrate on and realize the importance of search within their own websites or online stores, they gain a better understanding of the way customers shop and what they're shopping for, and they can make it easier for them to find the items they want to buy.

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This whitepaper examines site-search: what it is, the options that are available and best practices for how retailers can use search within their own sites to improve visitors' online experiences, increase conversions and sales, and build customer loyalty.

What is site-search?

In its simplest form, site-search is the function of a website that allows visitors to search the site for items or information. A company's website is often its first point of connection with the outside world and, as such, is an important channel for building a brand, communicating with customers (and partners), and in many cases selling products – particularly if visitors find what they're looking for quickly.

Despite its importance, site-search is often forgotten in the clamor to optimize web search rankings or seen as an extension of an e-commerce platform, or another internally-focused (enterprise) search function. However, because external visitors have very different search requirements to internal users, a one-size-fits-all approach to internal and external search will prove ineffective. In other words, site-search should include different features and capabilities that not only help visitors find what they're looking for but also compel them to make a purchase.

An internal or enterprise search product indexes multiple types of corporate documents and unstructured database files, while information contained on an external-facing website is often merchandise-oriented and contains detailed product information, external content from other sources like social media sites, or other types of rich content such as videos or high-resolution images. The way this information is indexed and displayed to users varies with both approaches. For example, a typical product search result on a retail website may contain an image of the product, descriptive information, ratings and reviews, pricing and availability details.

In general, search technologies have advanced considerably in the past few years and are much more capable of helping users find what they seek than they were previously. In the case of site-search, when someone types a keyword or phrase in the search box, the search results should be shown in a way that makes it easy for the customer to review and refine results, and ultimately select the item(s) they're looking for and continue with a purchase.

Why use site-search?

People who spend time on the internet have become accustomed to efficient search tools, like Google and more recently Bing; as a result, they've developed a low tolerance for search methods that produce poor results. In fact, surveys reveal that 73% of visitors will leave a site within two minutes if they can't find what they're searching for ⁱ.

Additionally, research from MarketingSherpa shows that almost half (43%) of visitors to a website go immediately to the search function ⁱⁱ, and that people who use site-search convert at two to three times the rate of those who don't ⁱⁱⁱ. When considering all of these factors, it becomes essential to serve website visitors with search functionality that allows them to find what they need quickly and efficiently.

Unfortunately, the critical aspects that make for a powerful site-search are often overlooked for more attractive aspects like design and layout. When customers reach a retail website, they want to find what they're looking for and not be distracted by unnecessary clutter. Design and layout are important for brand awareness and to attract customers, but the ability for visitors to easily find what they're looking for - via search or navigation - can make the difference between a satisfied customer and a one-time, never-to-return visitor.

From a retail perspective, customers who use the search box on e-commerce sites convert at nearly three times the rate of general browsers, however the reverse is also true: if they see zero or poor results, perhaps from a misspelled search or because the item they seek is not available (and the search function doesn't provide suggestions for similar items), they have already moved on to find a site that has hopefully has what they want.

How can I improve my site-search?

At the heart of site-search is making it easier for customers to discover products they want to buy or information they need. For this reason it's essential to include the relevant product details - and descriptions of the article or document - in search results so they're easily visible to customers. A good product description should include details that can be used to refine a search, such as the brand, model, size, color, and category. Additionally, including product images and videos in the search results will help customers assess the product results quickly to find what they're looking for. And if you offer ratings and reviews on your site, including those in the search results is also useful and presents another refinement option. Other useful information to include are product comments from social websites, which can help induce customers to buy.

Price is a major factor for many customers so the product price should also be clearly presented near the other details in the search results - even highlighting the price with a bold color or bigger font can improve conversions. Price should be presented as another way for people to refine the results and further hone in on what they're looking for.

Another way to improve conversions is to provide search suggestions - 'related search' links - to give people a broader view of products that match similar phrases or terms. Additionally, each customer may use different terms for the same products, so implementing an autocomplete feature - which completes search terms as customers type them - makes it easy for them to choose a relevant term that will likely return what they want.

This will also reduce spelling errors and help ensure customers can find exactly what they're looking for without having to guess what keyword they should be using.

Knowing customers and the terms they're using in their searches will enhance a retailer's ability to better serve them and in turn create a better customer experience.

Site-search in practice



Jelly Belly

Gourmet jelly bean and candy company



Challenge

Needed a powerful site-search feature that would allow customers to search for candies by flavor, color or other refinements, and that would deliver results quickly

Solution

Learning Search (SLI Systems' hosted site-search solution)

Results

- **Overall** site conversions nearly one-third
- **Average** have increased 10 percent
- **Belly** has boosted its visibility on major search engines

What are the options?

Before choosing an site-search engine, the most important consideration is whether to run the application in-house or have it hosted by a third party - as Software-as-a-Service (SaaS).

In-house applications

Running an application in-house requires capital expenditure, in terms of purchasing software licenses and hardware, as well as ensuring there is sufficient bandwidth to meet the demands of the site search function. In addition, there are installation, training and staffing costs to deploy the system and integrate it with other solutions used on the same platform, as well as costs for ongoing maintenance, management and upgrades.

Hosted applications/Software-as-a-Service

Hosted applications require no capital expenditure on hardware and software, or in-house expertise, and set-up can be as simple as providing a data feed, then changing the search form to point to the hosted search service. Maintenance and training costs are minimal, which helps deliver a faster Return on Investment (ROI). Additionally, because hosted solution providers run the system on their servers, the search activity won't put a drain on a website's performance, which can be especially beneficial during peak traffic times.

What can site-search deliver for online retailers?

Guiding the shopper

As we've discussed, site-search is one of the most important tools for creating an engaging experience online and driving conversions.

By understanding how customers shop or look for things online, retailers can develop their site to help visitors navigate more quickly and easily, offering an appropriate set of refinement options and using the language their customers use.

For example, a fashion retailer should provide refinement options including: gender, age, types of clothing (pants, suits, shirts, skirts, dresses, etc.), brands, colors, sizes, price, sales and accessories.

Giving visitors many options for narrowing their browsing into different categories -- based on previous visitors' searches -- will help the customer find exactly what they are looking for and thus improve the likelihood of a sale.

Improved understanding of customer behavior and improved marketing

If retailers are unsure about what customers are doing when they're visiting a site, they're missing opportunities. Effective site-search gives valuable insight into what site visitors are looking for - the terms they're searching with and the items they're clicking on - which can be incorporated into other elements of marketing, for example:

- **Personalized emails**

Based on customers' preferences, the data can be used to develop individually targeted emails that specifically promote certain products proven to be highly appealing to shoppers, and result in increased open rates, click-throughs and conversions. Our customer Footwear Etc. saw a dramatic improvement in its email marketing campaigns when it incorporated site search data: a 250% increase in open rate, 400% increase in click-through rate, and a 300% increase in sales.

- **Customized banner ads**

Customized banner ads can be added to site-search results pages for various search terms, highlighting particular promotions or to draw more attention to popular products for those individual search terms. Since they're highly relevant to the shopper, the ads are more likely to encourage click-throughs and possible purchases.

- **Long-tail search terms**

Companies can also extract additional value from site search by using it to identify long-tail search terms. These keywords can be higher converting than commonly used or seemingly obvious search terms. Individual long-tail terms may not generate as many sales, but since there are so many more long-tail terms, the net revenue can actually be higher. And these long-tail terms can be effective in SEO as well.

User-Generated SEO capabilities

An important part of any Search Engine Optimization (SEO) or Search Engine Marketing (SEM) campaign, including Pay-Per-Click (PPC), is researching the keywords for which a company should rank well or advertise. Site-search is an excellent source of keywords, as the search terms visitors use when searching a site tend to be similar to the terms they use when searching on web search engines.

By reviewing the site search results that visitors click on most for various keywords, retailers can build keyword lists for both specific products they're promoting and general product categories.

By analyzing the top keywords on an ongoing basis, companies will see that the most popular terms can change significantly over the course of just a couple of months. This gives them an advantage over their competition by staying more in tune with what their customers are actually shopping for - and the terms they're using to find items on the site.

An additional element is that search activity can be used to create landing pages for SEO and paid search campaigns - taking visitors directly to information about the product (and other relevant items), rather than a generic home page. This increases the likelihood that people will click and purchase.

Site-search in practice



Cruiser Customizing

Motorcycle, parts and accessories retailer with five distinct e-commerce sites

Challenge

Cruiser Customizing's previous site search solution required manual ranking of results and didn't deliver information that converted into sales

Solution

Learning Search and Site Champion (SLI Systems' hosted site search and user-generated SEO solutions)

Benefits

- People who conduct keyword searches convert at three times the rate of people who don't
- Customers who use the site search spend more than three times the amount per visit as those who don't
- Average time spent on the sites is more than double for site search users vs. non-site-search users, with more than twice the number of page views

Online merchandising capabilities or “Searchandising”

Taking a close look at a site’s search data not only allows companies to improve their external search, but also enables them to improve navigation, as well as make suggestions for additional products that might be of interest to particular customers.

By melding search data with merchandising techniques, also known as “searchandising,” retailers can deliver search results that are most likely to lead to sales and use customers’ individual search activity as a way to merchandise specific products.

In addition to getting customers to the items they want as quickly as possible, retailers can cross-sell or up-sell other items that are likely to interest them, in much the same way as brick and mortar retailers may put matching shoes, jewelry and other accessories next to a party dress.

Retailers can also use customer ratings from companies like PowerReviews or BaazarVoice to weight search results, giving more prominence to products that have a better rating. This is useful in terms of helping customers choose products that are most highly rated, and introducing it into the search results means they don’t have to leave the site to find out details from 3rd party review sites.

Faceted Navigation

Another effective way to improve the customer experience is to use the site-search data to build navigation pages based on product groups, or “facets,” that show similar products together, giving visitors more options for navigating a site and the retailer a powerful way to merchandise its product catalogue. Visitors can quickly go from thousands of matching results to just a few by refining by category, brand, color, and price.

By using the “click behavior” of previous visitors, companies can list products under each facet in order of most to least popular, increasing the likelihood that people will find what they’re looking for.

Driving the use of site-search

Making the site-search feature easier to find and use helps to increase the chances that visitors will locate what they need, leading to improved conversion rates. Some areas to consider are:

- **Position** the search box “above the fold,” or high up on the webpage so that visitors don’t need to scroll down to find it - data shows that people who search rather than browse are two to three times as likely to convert.
- **Test** different positions for the search box, and identify which positions generate the most search traffic. For example, try moving the search box from the right-hand upper corner of the site - a common placement for the search box - to the center of the page. Other changes to the search box, such as increasing its size and using bolder colors to make it stand out can also help drive the use of search. Our customer Black Forest Décor saw a 34% increase in its conversion rate when it made these changes.
- **Remove** text like “enter search here” in your search box, use JavaScript code so that the term disappears as soon as people click on the box or start typing within it - otherwise, search users have to take steps to delete the term, or they need to overwrite it with their search term, and this can increase the likelihood of spelling errors and poor search results.
- **Consider** the cursor focus in the search box – meaning, code the page so that the cursor is automatically in the box, and visitors can start typing their keywords immediately. This makes it faster and easier to start a search.
- **Auto**-complete, which suggests possible terms when visitors type the first few letters of a keyword. Auto-complete is especially useful for hard-to-spell searches, and saves time by requiring fewer keystrokes.

Measuring the quality of site-search

Many companies take the time to measure how customers came to their website - either from natural web search, SEO and pay-per-click, through email marketing or other channels. Unfortunately, most companies don't measure the performance of their site-search solutions - either because they're unsure of which metrics to analyze or they lack time. Or perhaps they think, "I just know my site search is working, so why bother?" However, it's extremely important for retailers in particular to understand how this critical function on their web site is working (or not), and what it's delivering to their bottom line.

Measurement can be done in a number of ways and using a number of key performance indicators (KPIs) which are often included in site-search packages, such as search rankings, what visitors are looking for and what they are finding or not finding.

Adding a feedback function to the search results page, in the form of a one-line question asking users if they found the search useful and giving them the option to click "yes" or "no" and provide further comment can also be useful - particularly for companies looking at the keywords people are using when they complain and the comments they give, as it allows the company to understand the types of problems people are having and highlights areas for improvement.

Companies can also integrate site-search tools with a range of analytics products to help understand metrics such as conversion rates of site search results pages compared to other pages, percentage of web site users that use site-search, percentage of revenue coming from site-search pages and average order size for site-search users compared to non- search users.

Conclusion

Site-search is a quick and cost-effective way to increase sales for e-commerce websites. The simple reason is that if the site search delivers results with relevant products that match a customer's requirements, then they are much more likely to buy.

On the flip side, if a search doesn't offer the right results, people will either assume the website doesn't have what they want or they'll get frustrated and leave. This means a lost sale, but more importantly a lost opportunity to build a long-lasting relationship with a potential customer, all because of a poor site search experience.

Site-search also goes beyond helping customers search for what they're looking for because when people search a site, it give retailers valuable insight into the search terms they use and how they look for products. This data can be used to improve the website by making it easier to navigate, as well as to develop more effective and targeted marketing programs, and deliver more accurate SEO and SEM keywords - further driving business to the website and helping to increase sales.

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About SLI Systems

SLI Systems provides full-service, customized, on-demand solutions for site-search, navigation, merchandising, and user-generated SEO. SLI Systems' solutions empower businesses to enhance customer satisfaction while increasing sales, reducing costs and increasing site conversions. Unlike traditional search and merchandising software, SLI Systems' patented technology continuously "learns" from the behavior of visitors over time to deliver more relevant results. SLI Systems is a privately held company with offices in San Jose, California; London, UK; New Zealand and Australia. For more information, visit www.sli-systems.com, or read the company's blog at <http://blog.sli-systems.com/>, watch the SLI YouTube Channel at <http://www.youtube.com/user/SLISiteSearch>, follow SLI on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/slisystems> or listen to SLI hosted ecommerce podcasts at <http://www.ecommercepodcast.com>.

S.L.I. Systems, Inc.
333 W. San Carlos Street
Suite 1250
San Jose, CA 95110
USA
US Toll Free: 866-240-2812

SLI Systems Ltd
First Floor, Kemp House
152-160 City Road
London, EC1V 2NP
United Kingdom
UK Free Phone: 0800-032-4783

S.L.I. Systems, Inc.
Level 1, 54 St. Kilda Road
St. Kilda
Melbourne 3182
Australia
Australia Phone: 1800-139-190

About Fifth Gear

Fifth Gear accelerates business growth for retailers and brand manufacturers across the nation who sell directly to consumers. Our flexible order fulfillment, contact center and marketing services let clients grow their ecommerce operations without the cost of adding new infrastructure or expertise. Our partnership with SLI Systems allows Fifth Gear clients to provide the most intuitive and user-friendly shopping experience for ecommerce customers. Advanced site search is just one more way that we help retailers like you create happy, profitable customers for ecommerce growth.

Learn more about Fifth Gear's partnership with SLI Systems at www.inFifthGear.com or call 800-383-4421.

Fifth Gear
6720 Parkdale Place
Indianapolis, IN 46254
USA
US Toll Free: 800-383-4421

