

SEARCH & PERFORMANCE MARKETING



July 2011

an internet retailing special report

sponsored by:



Editors' comment

Welcome to the latest in our series of *Internet Retailing* supplements. This time around we're looking at search and performance marketing, and asking just what online and cross-channel retailers need to do to get themselves found in an evermore complex and competitive retail market.

The possibilities open to online marketers have changed enormously as internet retailing has become ever more diverse. But while consumers and search engines are changing the way they do business, a recent Forrester report, which we examine in our strategy section (p24) suggests that advertisers are still approaching search in the same way they did five years ago.

That's to say, the emphasis is on paid search, with less attention given to new and emerging channels such as Facebook and YouTube. That might seem shortsighted in light of recent Hitwise research that shows Facebook and YouTube are in fact the second and third most visited sites in the UK, after Google UK.

As well as changing the way they search, consumers are also looking for different things. Today the focus is on brands and products rather than loyalty to retailers. Furthermore, customers know what they want and want to know how to get it quickly and in the most convenient manner. In a cross-channel world, that may include going to a shop just as much as finding an online provider.

For retailers, that means not just bringing them to your website, but showing them as early as possible that your site is both relevant and useful in answering their question – starting with the search results page, the banner ad or how you present your products. As consumers change the way they look, local information, expert guidance, social forums, reviews and recommendations, video and mobile are all part of the recipe for successful search and performance marketing.

Successful retailers are those who are developing a more sophisticated approach to the area than may have been the case in years gone by. After all, as Enda Breslin, managing director, data strategy at GSI Commerce says: "Too many people believe that if you just build a website, business is going to come. But the internet is a big place and that's simply not going to happen."

In this supplement we'll be looking at the key issues surrounding search and performance, asking experts in the field the questions you need to know the answers to and showing how some successful retailers have approached the challenge.

Through the pages of this supplement we take a look at six key issues for retailers to consider for effective search and performance marketing.

We start with web interface (p8), and consider the distinctions between search and browsing. That's important because, while there are plenty of new ways to bring customers to your site, such efforts are likely to be wasted if they can't find what they're looking for because of poor design.

In our merchandising section (p12) Penelope Ody takes a look at the task facing retailers as they look to strike a balance between reaching out to their customers with attractive, personalised offers and buying suggestions – and irritating them with offers that just aren't relevant.

When considering cross-channel (see p16) we look at how merchants can continue to appeal to shoppers as they move across a range of different devices, including the all-important smartphones and tablet computers.

In our logistics section (p20) we take a look at the practical side of optimising your site so that it's easy to find, and for the right reasons. Here we also consider how social media is increasingly part of the mix – and how you can use this to boost your strategy.

On p24 we take a look at what elements you need to consider including in your strategy in order to drive traffic to your site fruitfully, and how to tell if it's working for you.

Finally, on p28, our customer engagement section considers the idea of search being both ubiquitous, pervasive and driven by customers. This doesn't sound like an environment where retailers have much control over what's happening, but that only makes it more important to try to get customers' attention.

We hope you find this supplement useful. If you have comments, questions or suggestions for future supplements, do contact us. We can be reached at chloe@internetretailing.net or jonathan@internetretailing.net.

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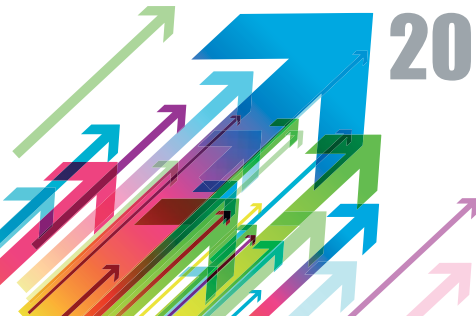
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WHAT NEW OPPORTUNITIES HAVE RECENT DEVELOPMENTS CREATED FOR RETAILERS TO MAKE MORE OF



With its estimated registered user base of 750 million, Facebook stands as a testament to the ubiquitous influence of social media on the web, with approximately one out of every two people with internet access having an account and a third of users accessing the site via mobile phones.

Such popularity brings with it marked changes in user behaviour on the web as a whole, meaning if digital marketers wish to remain effective, there is a need to closely monitor what users are doing and how they are doing it.

This change in user behaviour and the rise of social media has ramifications for all aspects of digital marketing, even more traditional branches such as search engine optimisation (SEO). Whereas search engines have primarily used data on how web pages link to each other as a main factor in rankings, there has been a shift to more social-based signals. This shift, while still in its infancy has been forced by users who are no longer posting links, but sharing, tweeting and liking. The situation has been highlighted with Google recently releasing its own social +1 button in an effort to garner its own social data.

So what opportunities are these changes creating for online retailers? As an online business, there has never been a time where you have so much access to your customers – their location, their social circles, their interests, preferences and the opportunity to have your brand interact directly with them. The challenge for businesses online is to find how to use and manage this information effectively, ethically and in a way that is agreeable to your customers.

This ease of communication brings with it transparency, which can be a double-edged sword. Investing time and money in genuine customer interaction, helping them throughout their whole interaction with your brand, not just 'aiming for the sale' is more important than ever. Impressing just one customer can lead to a domino effect as their social circle is likely to be a treasure chest of similar future customers they can become an advocate to.

With the right strategy and tools in place, investing in a social media presence can be a fast way to grow your brand and profits online, while having fringe benefits such as improved search visibility and long-term exposure.

www.further.co.uk

Retailers that want to take advantage of these opportunities need to start by understanding who their customers are, and how these customers use mobile and social media as part of online journeys that incorporate a broad range of touchpoints.

Search is about putting your brand in front of people who haven't, as yet, made a brand decision and your brand needs to be visible throughout this process, including when people are using mobile search and seeking social media recommendations.

People are increasingly using mobile for inspiration and to research, evaluate and purchase goods. The ever-increasing speed of phones and networks provides faster and easier access to information, while the rise of app-powered smartphones and tablets, which make it simple to search and browse the web, provides more and more opportunity for people to engage with (hopefully mobile-friendly) content and brand assets while on the move.

Use your search data to understand your customers and how important different mobile platforms are to your business and plan accordingly (and then keep this plan up-to-date). Remember that different mobile platforms can make for different ways of displaying results but bear in mind general principles including the importance of local results, autocompleted search queries and the like.

The symbiotic relationship between search and social media is deserving of far more space than we have here, but let's focus on the fact that it's a fantastic way of enabling visitors and customers to share content that makes them look smart, funny or interesting while signalling to the search engines that a site deserves to rank for relevant keywords.

Social media, and particularly its emphasis on fresh (user-generated) content has always had the ability to enhance a smart search strategy but the sharing, social curation functionality provided by Facebook Likes, Tweets and now Google +1s (which could be a game changer) can now be used to drive traffic and increase brand awareness across broad and diverse networks.

It's inevitable that social activity will increasingly influence how search engines value a page. It's also inevitable that Google (which represents 90 per cent of the UK market) will continue to experiment with how they deliver the results that will ensure their continued market dominance.

In light of this, the opportunity for retailers is to spend less time worrying about Google's algorithms and how they can exploit them and more time understanding their customers and influencers and how they're using mobile, social and search to shop.

www.propellernet.co.uk

DEVELOPMENTS IN MOBILE AND SOCIAL MEDIA SEARCH AND PERFORMANCE MARKETING?



In order to make the most of the latest developments and opportunities in ecommerce, it's necessary to have the best tools available. However customers arrive at a site, whether via mobile, social media or plain old web surfing, they need to be able to find what they're looking for fast...

It's not a matter of just finding a product or service fast, it's a matter of finding the right product fast. Over the past three years, PrismaStar worked with academics, industry experts and users to understand human online buying behaviour and this is what we've found:

- Fast is no longer just a measure of clicks. The old ecommerce mantra of "no more than five clicks" misses some important human behaviour. Online shoppers need to see real and rapid progress in their online shopping experience regardless of the number of clicks.
- A well-designed guided selling wizard needing 10-15 clicks to navigate with fast page loads, clear navigation and limited decision points (shopper thinking time) will always out-perform a cluttered product catalogue that theoretically only needs five clicks to order a product.
- When it comes to finding the right product, although some shoppers will know exactly what they want to buy (meaning their only decision factors are price and availability), our research shows that most shoppers want an experience that mirrors that of the High Street – they want to browse. This is "needs choice iteration": shoppers intuitively go through a process of comparing the pros and cons of various products to refine their choice to a decision point.
- At first glance browsing and fast may seem a contradiction, but just represents two stages of the customer journey. In offline terms think of it as you want to get to the shops as quickly as possible, but once there you're happy to spend a bit of time browsing.
- Classic online product catalogues or filter searches are often barriers to the browsing experience which creates frustration in shoppers. The only way they offer "needs choice iteration" is by using the back button (trying to avoid "no results found"), they don't allow choice prioritisation and often miss good choices that are only £1 outside the filter threshold.

PrismaStar solves these issues with its Product Selector and sophisticated data management systems. Independent A/B tests show the PrismaStar Selector increases AOV, decreases time to order, and increases conversion rates by up to 70 per cent
www.prismastar.com

Reaping the revolution:

Use of mobile and social media is soaring. With 1 billion people accessing the mobile web in 2011, retailers can market to their customer base almost 24/7. Problem is, so can everyone else. So how do you implement a multi-channel marketing strategy that cuts through the chatter to fast-track engagement and customer conversion?

Nowadays, you can't just throw money at Google, sit back and congratulate yourself. Search must still be the epicentre of your digital strategy to ensure you maintain synergy with acquisition, engagement and retention.

The mobile revolution

Consumers use mobile to browse the web and read emails while commuting, watching TV and even during meals. This constant brand engagement is crucial and plays a huge part in conversion. The likes of Tesco and Sainsbury's have launched both iPhone and Android apps to allow customers to shop on-the-go.

In addition to an 'app strategy', retailers should also be thinking about a wider mobile strategy. Last year, if your website was not optimized for popular handsets, you were likely missing out on 3-4% of traffic that could drive sales. In 2011, those figures are rising to 6-7%. Smartphone devices are allowing for an increasingly rich web experience on the move and so a well optimized, search-friendly mobile offering needs to be high on the digital agenda.

Facebook and Twitter:

Building an online community and customer services channel

Retailers should fully maximize the opportunity Facebook's popularity affords. Online fashion retailer ASOS launched a Facebook 'store', allowing customers to shop directly from the site, as well as give feedback on products and customer service.

And while users don't necessarily log into Twitter with an unfolded wallet, they do research and ask questions about prospective purchases. Twitter, when done 'right', becomes a customer service platform to help you handle general enquiries or complaints in a visible way.

Multi-channel attribution:

It is also absolutely essential for brands to understand the importance of multi-channel analysis – yes, social media can create demand and buzz through engagement, but it is very likely your customer will convert through another channel such as natural or paid search at a later date.

Without tracking all touch points on the way to conversion, brands won't be correctly attributing value to channels that are making an impact.

This type of analysis is particularly important for websites selling more expensive products, with longer consideration periods - for example, holidaymakers booking their annual holiday.

The power of social proof:

People trust their friends' recommendations. Retailers must now learn to leverage the power of social media and mobile, in conjunction with their wider search and digital strategy to build trust and loyalty with their brands.

www.ispymarketing.com

10 COMMON MISTAKES RETAILERS MAKE IN E-COMMERCE

The average online conversion rate for an ecommerce site is approximately 2%. That leaves us with a massive 98% of traffic to a website who are exiting without buying anything. There are a several reasons for this, including a large number of users who are simply browsing and never intended to make an online purchase. But many of the factors that can influence whether or not a visitor converts are within our control, and there are some easily avoidable yet common mistakes that can have a hugely detrimental effect on a site's conversion rate.

1. NOT UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OFFLINE AND ONLINE SHOPPERS

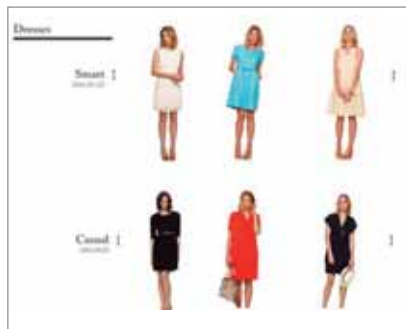
Traditional retailers employ several techniques, such as hiding best-selling products at the rear of a store to ensure shoppers see everything else first in the hope of selling additional items, which simply do not work online. An online shopper wants a convenient, easy and stress free experience and will not spend hours browsing in the same way as someone making their way up the high street. And if online shoppers do get frustrated it is a lot easier for them to simply close their browser and abandon their basket than it is for someone to walk out of a shop with a half full trolley.

2. HAVING A CONFUSING NAVIGATION

The navigation on a website needs to be logical, intuitive and designed to allow users to locate what they are looking for with as little effort as possible. Menus that keep products hidden in unobvious categories or use industry specific terms that shoppers will not understand are a huge conversion barrier as are poor site search and filtering options. People can't buy things they can't find!

How not to do it:

An example where a leading online retailer has a confusing navigation includes offering only basic filtering



What's more, the number of items available seems to change after expanding and closing the panels:



3. LACK OF CLEAR PRODUCT INFORMATION

Many online retailers seem to forget that unlike in a traditional retail outlet, online shoppers have no access to the actual product. Visitors to a website cannot touch and feel products, which makes selling products like apparel particularly challenging. For this reason it is critical to give users as much information as possible, both in terms of product information and imagery:

- Zoomable front and back product shots
- Product dimensions in the description and pictures of products on a model or a mannequin to give an indication of size
- Number of front, back and inside pockets – particularly important to men
- Fabric type (including lining)
- A clear link to size guide

How to do it:

Sarenza.co.uk's excellent quality product pictures give users confidence to shop online.



Pictures of products modeled by people on Asos.com clearly show product dimensions.



How not to do it:

An example of not clearly communicating product information includes making it difficult to visualise the size of a similar product.



4. HAVING POOR AVAILABILITY

Once you have managed to get a user to the website and they have navigated to the product they want to buy, it isn't a great experience for them to find out at this point that they can't make a purchase as the item is out of stock, especially if they struggled to find the product in the first place. Due to the time it takes a website to update it is sometimes not possible to have stock of absolutely everything featured, but there are tactics that can be employed to minimise frustration from a lack of fulfillment, including giving minimal prominence across the site to products with low stock levels and allowing users to request 'back in stock' emails.

How to do it – LK Bennet "Contact me when back in stock" feature:

5. UNCLEAR DELIVERY AND RETURNS POLICIES

Unclear or hard to find delivery and returns policies are one of the biggest barriers preventing people from shopping online. Not only should this information be easy to locate, it should also be actively promoted at key points across the website, especially if either or both are free. If a user reaches a product detail page, the information needs to be presented to them here to prevent them having to search for it and leaving the purchase path.

6. NOT HAVING A GUEST CHECKOUT

According to Forrester Research more than 23% of online shoppers will immediately abandon their basket if they have to register on a website to buy. When you calculate the impact a 23% increase in

conversion rate could have to a business's bottom line, and consider that most of the data capture obtained through a registration is gathered using a guest checkout anyway, it is quite hard to think of a reason not to include one.

7. HAVING A POOR CHECKOUT PROCESS

Industry standard basket abandonments range from 40-60%, making it even more important to keep those users who actually want to buy, in the purchase funnel until they do so. Long, complicated processes and confusing forms asking for unnecessary information, with unclear error messaging, can drive shoppers who were fully intent on buying to abandon ship, not only from the transaction but from returning to the website for any future purchases.

8. IGNORING ONLINE TRUST ISSUES

There will always be a doubt in the back of some online shoppers' minds that buying online isn't safe. For this reason it is crucial to ensure that visitors to an ecommerce site are reassured of the site's integrity and are made to feel that their transaction will be secure. Unprofessional looking design, poor forms and a lack of secure server logos are guaranteed to bring that nagging doubt from the back of a user's mind to the forefront.

9. POOR MULTICHANNEL INTEGRATION

Many consumers research products on ecommerce sites, with no intent to ever purchase online, then make their way to the high street when they are ready to buy. For some retailers this can be more than 90% of customers, with only an average of 2-3% actually completing an online transaction. For this reason, multichannel, or 'click and mortar' stores, need to ensure users online have a positive and consistent user experience that will encourage them to shop in store; a bad or frustrating experience online can prevent instore sales.

10. NOT GETTING THE BEST USE OUT OF ANALYTICS

User behavior varies greatly from site to site and across different industries and sectors. For that reason it is absolutely crucial to have a firm grasp on a site's analytics to gain a thorough

understanding of how users shop on a particular website and to identify the conversion barriers that are in their way. This data needs to inform the key business decisions that will optimise the website for conversion and ultimately drive the bottom line. ■

Fiona Low, I Spy Conversion & Analytics Account Manager
www.ispymarketing.com/contactus



Launched in 2005, I Spy is an award-winning digital marketing agency that delivers integrated social media, search, display, mobile marketing and conversion optimisation. I Spy's bespoke philosophy of 'Uptimisation' seeks to up expectations from traditional optimisation. Uptimisation is achieved by building higher search rankings and stronger social media presences through intelligent integration of search disciplines and insightful analysis of consumer behaviour and data. In 2010, I Spy launched Upcast – a web-based campaign management tool that improves overall ROI by simplifying key areas of paid Facebook advertising with a quick and coherent 'one click' approach. Independently owned, I Spy is a founding member of the IPA's search body, a member of the Internet Advertising Bureau and is Google AdWords Qualified. I Spy's reputation for excellence was recently cemented by listing in Media Momentum's top 50 fastest growing media companies in Europe. I Spy has also been nominated for NMA effectiveness awards, honoured by Smarta 100 and has won a Best Business award.



IT'S ALL ABOUT THE JOURNEY...

RETAILERS ARE UTILISING MORE AND MORE SOPHISTICATED WAYS TO REACH CUSTOMERS VIA SEARCH. BUT, DISCOVERS **JONATHAN WRIGHT**, SUCH METHODS ARE NO SUBSTITUTE FOR GOOD DESIGN AND SITES THAT ARE INTUITIVE TO NAVIGATE

In an era when Google's oh-so-secret algorithms are talked about in hushed terms, it's perhaps no wonder that we often think of search as a technical challenge. It's an impression only fuelled by the growth of the search engine optimisation (SEO) industry, with its promise of identifying the exact right words and phrases to help ensure that all-important listing near the top of results.

That's not quite how Andy Budd, founding partner and managing director of usability and web design experts Clearleft, sees things as he mulls over the conundrum of why retailers with huge expertise in presenting goods in the real world too often see the digital domain as somewhere entirely separate, with different rules.

"People see search as a technical problem but it isn't, it's a design

problem, it's a merchandising problem," he says. "It's exactly the same if people are browsing through your aisles or browsing through your online catalogue. If people are searching knowing that they want to find a particular product on your site, you need to design that *experience*."

With apologies to the makers of *Field of Dreams*, build it right and the customers will come. But how to go



about this? Not only are customers' journeys becoming increasingly complex in a cross-channel world where a transaction may begin with research on a laptop in front of the TV and later a smartphone on the bus, take a dog leg through Facebook and end with a purchase in a retail store, but there's a key step in most of these customer journeys over which retailers don't have much influence.

EXTERNAL SEARCH

"The ability of controlling the interface and the way you interact with clients starts with the search engine, but you usually have very little control over how that interaction happens," says Budd. It

gets worse because Google, as Budd later adds, is a company that tries to "hide all of the intelligence of the system from the user".

That's not to say that retailers should just give up and not bother with basic techniques such as SEO or trying to analyse what keywords are working. Moreover, you can employ techniques such as microformats (<http://microformats.org/>), a relatively new approach to metadata that enables search engines to index information better and work out what kinds of content can be found on different pages.

"People like Yahoo!, in all of their comparison websites, have marked up all of their reviews of their products as 'h-products' and that means that Google now knows that this thing is a product rather than just a generic thing," says Budd. "So when you're doing a product search, it's much more likely to pull out this information. So it's opening up your data a little bit, almost like an API [application programming interface], to the search engine."

In terms of paid search, Ed Stevenson, managing director, EMEA & APAC at Marin Software, flags up iGoogle's product extensions for PPC adverts. "These display product images, titles and prices of products within sponsored listings, so searchers have a better idea of the products and prices that they are clicking through to, which means that the retailer benefits from better-qualified visitors who are more likely to make a

“ Search is a merchandising problem, the same as people browsing through your aisles or your online catalogue. You need to design that experience ”

purchase," Stevenson says. "The tool also helps to grab the users' attention beyond the standard PPC adverts of retailers who are simply using text listings."

Another technique is a little more lateral. Juan Vargas, SEO director of search marketing specialists Tug, advises thinking about using video to grab attention. "Not only are video results less competitive than traditional search, making it easier to achieve better results, but they are frequently featured in universal results, with around a 40 per cent higher click-through rate than the traditional blue links," he says.

But however customers get to your site, and the examples above are by no means the only methods being employed as retailers seek to gain a competitive advantage by giving customers richer information, one thing remains fundamental. If customers don't like what they see on a site, they won't stay around.

To return squarely to Budd's first point about design, there's really no

THE LOCAL FACTOR

Smartphones, with their small screens, aren't the best devices for detailed searches. The five results per page you get with a mobile Google search compares badly to the plethora of results you get on a desktop PC. And yet smartphones easily outscore PCs on one front: if you're out and about, they enable you to search on the hoof.

"What mobile gives you is this opportunity for incredible context," says cxpartners' Giles Colborne. "You know where somebody is, you know what time of day it is, you know who that person is, most likely." This opens up huge new opportunities around search, especially as a percentage of mobile searches are inevitably going to be local: such as a search for a local restaurant or a chemist.

"Research from Google has shown that one in three mobile search queries are made by people who are looking for something in their local area," says Marin Software's Ed

Stevenson. "A retailer's search listings should reflect this. Mobile searchers are generally looking for store locations or a phone number to call, so advertisers need to be using location and click-to-call phone numbers in the ad text."

This also opens up opportunities to push offers. If someone searches for pizza, for example, why not send a coupon? This approach has the advantage of engaging with customers when they're already receptive. In contrast, Clearleft's Andy Budd cites the example of a high street bank that pushed messages via Bluetooth as an example of a company doing this badly.

"You don't want to have people walking down the street and every time you walk past this particular store, it kind of attacks your mobile phone and pops up a little message saying, 'Come here, come here, come here,' it's really irritating," Budd says. "It actually has to be driven by the user."

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"We've found **LXRRetail™** well organized and certainly up to the task. Tracking/reporting capabilities are impressive, and the **LXR** interface makes everything from keyword-level tweaks to broad changes fast and straightforward."

~ Carl Christensen, SEM Specialist, Rockler

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point in doing all this work on search if customers arrive at a confusing or inappropriate page when they get to a company's site. In contrast to the contingent search engine environment, this is something retailers most certainly can control.

"One of the horrible things that happens with SEO is you'll do a really specific advert on really specific optimisation, a particular page, and people will see an ad saying 'click here for widgets' and when you click through, you can't find the widget. You're not sent to the widgets homepage, or there's not a specialist homepage," says Budd.

It's worth adding here that, if you were to find such a page via Google, you'd be able to see a pop-up snapshot of the page in the search engine, visually reinforcing the widget message. Another recurring mistake is for the language used in paid search to be different to the language employed on a site – and confused shoppers tend to be suspicious shoppers who are less likely to part with cash.

SITE SEARCH

This opens up an interesting area. Moving on to internal search, can retailers learn anything from the way search engines present information? A company such as Google, after all, is constantly tweaking what it does, testing out new features. Perhaps surprisingly, Budd for one is skeptical of this idea.

It's not just that search engine companies are so secretive about how they operate, it's more fundamental than that. In some sense, if customers are using the search box on your site, then you've already failed. "Searches are generally associated with a lower success rate in finding the product and buying the product than browsing," says Giles Colborne, managing director of usability specialists xpartners.

Look at it this way, if customers who perhaps have already used a search engine to navigate to your site then have to use search again to find specific pages that interest them (pages remember that may feature goods they actually want to

SHORT ATTENTION SPAN

"The whole Internet is driven, effectively, by attention. So if I come to your website and you're trying to sell me widgets, you have my attention for a very short amount of time and you need to make sure that all the cues, all of the signposts, all of the designs get me, the Internet user, to the widgets page and checked out as soon as possible."

Andy Budd, founding partner and managing director, Clearleft



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY



EVOLVING SPACE

"I keep screenshots of major websites and you'd be surprised how much Google has changed in the last 10 years, it's just astonishing. And it's all tiny, tiny little refinements. For instance, you get little page previews that you never got before. You have information being dragged in from social networks, which you never had before. There are lots of little, subtle hints around interaction design."

Giles Colborne, managing director, xpartners

THINK LOCAL

"New interface features on search engines are very focused on improving the users' local experience. With this in mind, retailers need to start thinking about how to advertise to those customers looking to locate their shops on the high street, and making sure every store is visible when users are carrying out local searches."

Ed Stevenson, managing director, EMEA & APAC, Marin Software



VIDEO MATTERS

"YouTube is the second largest search engine, beating the likes of Bing and Yahoo! So consider setting up a video channel on this platform and interact with your visitors providing information about your products."

Juan Vargas, SEO director, Tug

buy), this will quickly test their patience. Generally, people would much rather browse than search. Accordingly, it's better to focus resources on good design than to expect clever search features somehow to overcome and make up for poor design – they won't.

All that said, internal search should still follow best-practice guidelines. Never return a null result, advises Colborne, never say you can't find anything. "If you're bringing back 'We couldn't find this but we could find this,' make sure you explain why, make sure your search engine explains its thinking," he adds.

In addition, remember that search is not just a two-step, enter-words-get-result process. "It's an iterative process and what people see in the search results will inspire them to change their minds about what they should be searching for: they'll either narrow their search terms or head off in a different direction," says Colborne. "You have to design for a much more complicated dialogue."

Or, better still, as far as possible design out the need for search entirely. "You need to make sure the architecture of your site works, that somebody, an information architect, a user experience designer, has gone through and made sure that all the naming conventions are great, all the labels are great, that your content can be found, and test that and validate that," concludes Andy Budd. "Assuming that the rest of your site is great, then people won't have to fall back on search." ■

“ You need to make sure the architecture of your site works, that somebody has gone through and made sure that your content can be found ”



MAKE IT PERSONAL

WITH TODAY'S EMPHASIS ON PERSONALISED OFFERS AND INDIVIDUAL TARGETING, STRIKING A BALANCE BETWEEN APPEALING TO SHOPPERS WITH SPECIFIC MERCHANDISING OFFERS AND IRRITATING THEM BY MISINTERPRETING THEIR INPUT CAN BE CHALLENGING. **PENELOPE ODY** REPORTS

On theory it should be simple, even foolproof. You can identify precisely what your online shoppers have looked at and bought; add some basic socio-demographics, web analytics, cookies and so forth; and you should have a clear picture of your customer's preferences to guide one-to-one merchandising and personalised promotions.

Unfortunately, theory and practice rarely match and while the technology is clever it is often also far from perfect. The result can be a succession of irritating ads or inappropriate promotions that totally fail to engage the would-be shopper. It's

something with which we – as consumers – are all too familiar: those post-Christmas mailings from Amazon trying to tempt us with lookalikes of the books we have recently bought as gifts for other people, for example.

For Richard Jackson, director at system integrators Session Digital a recent irritation was tea: "The first thing I happened to look at on a particular site was tea bags," he says, "and from then on I kept getting ads and promotions on every page for tea. Personalisation can be a tool to enrich the merchandising experience but it has to be used intelligently."

Effective on-line merchandising and personalisation starts, argues Jackson, with a good understanding of what the customer wants and how the customer perceives your brand. "Retailers think they know who their customers are and what they want," he says, "but their attempts at personalisation often reveal serious misconceptions."

PERTINENT AND PERSONAL

For John Stelzer, worldwide industry executive for retail at IBM, the advent of smartphones has had a major impact on these retail personalisation attempts.

“Consumers now expect a one-to-one relationship,” he says, “and that changes the expectations of the brand. The more we use smartphones the more we expect things to be pertinent and real-time.”

Use of mobile can help to identify the individual shopper but where shoppers are anonymous there has to be an incentive for them to reveal their identity: promotional offers and money-off coupons have been the carrot to attract consumers to loyalty schemes for years and the convenience of personalised recommendations, saving search time, can play a similar role in online shopping – but only if those recommendations are truly relevant.

While on-site ‘searchandising’ techniques are increasingly sophisticated so that clever little ‘you might also like...’ panels appear alongside the fashion item a shopper has just searched for, these suggestions can also be wide of the mark unless more specific information – such as age and previous purchases – are taken into consideration. Second-guessing what customers want can be dangerous – especially in an age where a woman might happily team an Armani jacket and Jimmy Choo stilettos with Primark jeans and vintage jewellery found in a car boot sale. Equally irritating are those constant personalised updates, so that when you try to go back to a page that caught your fancy a few clicks earlier the images and products have changed beyond all recognition to reflect whatever you have looked at since.

At the very basic level consumers often use quite different words from merchants to describe the items they are searching for: something a company specialising in “artisan preserves” soon discovered when it failed to include ‘jam’ among its keywords.

TECH-SAVVY SEARCHERS

Today’s online shoppers are also no longer techno-novices, they generally have a good understanding of how systems should work and are changing their search techniques accordingly. “Users are adapting their behaviour to get better results,” says James Scott, managing director, EMEA, at Channel Advisor, “so we’re seeing longer-tail keyword searches or searches by EAN code. Mobiles are also having an impact as shoppers can scan bar codes with their phones and search that way.”

While long-tail searches should bring up exact matches from the likes of Google, often the landing page on a particular site

SHOPPING HABITS

“If you know who the customer is you can leverage data about their shopping habits, purchases or even what they have revealed on social networking sites. With unknowns then predictive behaviour is more important: you can use cookies to track web interactions or see how they have navigated through your site so personalised marketing can be based on presumed current interests.”

John Stelzer, worldwide industry executive for retail, IBM



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY



DISPLAYING GOODS

“You need to regard Google as a shop window and ensure that you have 100 per cent coverage there of all the products in your catalogue.”

James Scott, managing director, EMEA, Channel Advisor

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

“Personalisation is a strategy not a product feature and not a silver bullet. Some also seem to think that once the strategy is in place then the technology will do the rest – but it needs to be constantly refreshed and adapted to changing trends. It is all too easy to assume that customers think about your merchandise in the same way that you do but the way they associate products may be quite different.”

Richard Jackson, director, Session Digital



ACHIEVING CONSISTENCY

“Shoppers like personalised recommendations but they need to be consistent across all channels. There has to be clear strategy to support that personalised offer and good data integration.”

Sarah Taylor, retail director, Oracle

can be far more random. Scott argues that retailers should have at least one advert to match every item in their product catalogues so that when a searcher keys in, say, “cerise floral patterned short-sleeved, ankle length dress”, then ads for the precise item with current price rather than just generic “summer dresses” top the Google list.

“Keeping dynamic catalogues up to date with current availability and prices is challenging,” says Scott, “so you need automated systems to push the price or current promotions – such as free shipping – from the website to the ad. It’s not something you can do manually in Excel – no company could employ enough people to do it all.”

To meet this demand for highly targeted ads, Channel Advisor launched Inventory Driven Search, a hosted application, in March this year. The tool generates suitable 50-55 word ads that will deliver

the relevant page and selling message in response to long-tail keyword searches. “Around half our client base has now adopted the system,” says Scott, “and they’re seeing an average increase of around 20 per cent in revenues as a result.”

SECOND TIME AROUND

While such ads may drive shoppers to a site, if they fail to buy on the first visit then re-targeting can help bring them back. “Click-through rates on these ads

“ Consumers now expect a one-to-one relationship. The more we use smartphones the more we expect things to be pertinent and real time ”

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are around six times higher than ordinary banner adverts,” says Michael Steckler, managing director for Northern Europe at Criteo.

Using cookies, Criteo can identify when a particular customer lands on one of the sites where it has banner ads and can thus generate a relevant advert relating to the merchandise which the shopper had previously looked at, but not bought, on a Criteo client site. Typically these targeted ads will be shown in the first few days following the failed purchase and gradually tail off if the shopper does not respond and return to buy. A recent study Criteo completed with Nielsen showed that personalised ads doubled the likelihood of the shopper returning to the original site with a six-fold increase in conversion rate.

Each Criteo ad has an information button which explains how the personalised ad comes to be on the site: “Well below one per cent of shoppers actually click on the information button,” says Steckler, “and around 20 per cent of those who do, click to opt out.”

While that one per cent figure may imply that many shoppers don't actually notice the ads, the Nielsen study suggests otherwise with a 19 per cent upturn in brand awareness and a 17 per cent increase in brand trust. However, such re-targeted ads are not to everyone's taste. “Customers may simply want to browse a site and not feel that they are being manipulated,” says Richard Jackson. “Many have a low threshold for recommendations and can become irritated if they keep on seeing the same ad following them for days.”

As an alternative to retargeting, nugg.ad, a German company now becoming active in the UK, uses predictive behavioural techniques to increase the relevance of both online ads and merchandising content. In May, nugg.ad launched its Content Targeting application which uses anonymous data from surveys and click behaviour, to determine the interests of each website visitor based on socio-demographic criteria and product interest data. Even if a user visits a website for the first time, says nugg.ad, pages can be tailored dynamically to suit their requirements, without the need for site registration.

The system has already been incorporated into CoreMedia's web content management software. “It allows website operators to focus on visitors as it sends recommendations to the website's

“ You can't just respond to the last action. You have to take in the whole body of interactions over time, and a lot of technology is failing to do that ”

content management system in real time,” says Karim Attia, chief business development officer at nugg.ad.

Initially nugg.ad worked with content owners to increase the stickiness of sites but the company has now expanded to online retail as well. Typical projects have included a scheme with HolidayCheck which identified the region where web visitors were based so that if it were raining the ad would say something like: “Hey – it's wet outside so why not think about a trip to somewhere sunny?”

“For us as a travel agency, the topic of weather plays an important role when approaching customers,” says Axel Jockwer, marketing director at HolidayCheck. “It is strongly linked with emotions so thanks to the weather targeting system the messages are perfectly attuned to the current situation.”

“It produced a 15 to 20 per cent increase in click-throughs,” adds Attia, “and we're now seeing similar results from retail sites.”

Like other predictive technologies such systems may get it right much of the time but consumers can be fickle and second-guessing is not easy.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

“There is too much information to throw people at the problem so you need technology,” says John Stelzer, “and you can't just respond to the last action, as much technology does, you have to have systems that take in the whole body of interactions over time, and a lot of technology is failing to do that.”

IBM has been building what it terms its “smarter commerce” offer over the past 18 months or so to do just that, buying a raft of businesses such as Coremetrics, Unica, Netezza and Sterling Commerce. “The result can deliver real-time offers based on recent behaviour but also incorporating historic data about transactions and incomplete purchases as well as web analytics with highly efficient access to all relevant data,” adds Stelzer.

Ann Summers is among retail chains adopting such a personalised approach using RichRelevance's enRICH personalisation engine to deliver targeted merchandise recommendations based on

such parameters as previous purchases, browsing history, demographics, and referral sites.

“We are already gaining valuable insight into our customers and the way they shop for and discover our products,” says ecommerce director Andrew Harbor. “For example, we can access vastly more kinds of associated data about what people viewed after viewing a certain item. It means that we are more in-tune with our customers' behaviour and can take a more holistic approach to merchandising and promotions.”

Oracle – which acquired ATG, one of the pioneers of searchandising, last year – also sees data and hard facts as a better guide to efficient personalisation. “The system is data driven,” says Oracle's retail director, Sarah Taylor, “so it looks at what customers are actually doing and have done in the past rather than trying to predict behaviour.”

Using individual transaction records and response to loyalty schemes and promotions to predict future purchasing, says Taylor, can be most effective in areas such as grocery. “Obviously fashion is more difficult as you have to cope with changing trends and styles. These are non-repeating purchases and customers generally want to navigate their way through a fashion site themselves rather than be directed towards certain types of products.”

Already sites like ASOS.com have more of a magazine feel and personalising content and presentation is likely to become more important in future than simply personalising offers. For Tom Cape, managing director of video specialists Capablue, the growth of television commerce is going to transform personalised merchandising even further. “You can track what someone is watching and push relevant content and adverts to them,” he says, “and we'll see many more opportunities as Internet TV grows.”

Within the next year or so, clicking on that eye-catching *Strictly Come Dancing* dress may not only route through to the relevant website to buy a lookalike but will probably also mean that the next advert you see will be for the matching shoes or tango lessons. ■



CONSUMERS ON THE MOVE

MOBILE IS KEY TO GLUING TOGETHER TRUE MULTICHANNEL COMMERCE, WHICH MEANS IT'S ESSENTIAL THAT COMPANIES UNDERSTAND HOW CUSTOMERS USE SMARTPHONES FOR SEARCH, AND THEN ACT ON THIS KNOWLEDGE, ARGUES M-RETAILING EDITOR [PAUL SKELDON](#)

WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY

Many retailers are expending a lot of energy and cash looking at how to become mobile. In reality, what they are doing – and must do – is add mobile to an

increasing roster of channels, media and devices through which consumers want to interact with them and, hopefully, buy things.

This multichannel approach is well documented, but in reality most businesses are failing to deliver what consumers want from multichannel: true channel integration. And this is particularly the case when it comes to searching for products and product data. It is also an increasing challenge for retailers looking to use new channels to market what they do.

A recent study by DemandWare revealed that 51 per cent of consumers already want to add goods to their basket on a mobile phone and then check out later on a PC or tablet, yet only a quarter of retailers currently let them do this.

When it comes to search, the challenges facing retailers who need to be found in an ever more fragmented and competitive marketplace online and in the real world are greater still. Search is so important as it is often the starting point of the whole retail journey. In fact, even good old-fashioned shop windows offer some degree of search-based shopping journey initiation: it's how humans operate, we look for things. So getting search right – and integrated – across your channels is one of the key steps to creating a holistic shopping experience.

MOBILE COMPLICATIONS

The challenge that mobile devices throw into the mix are that the usual rules of search apply – but with many other things to consider thrown in as well. For instance, it's not just a case of appearing on Google, but also a case of looking at how you appear when people search on Google Maps, say. There is also the added complexity of third-party vouchers and couponing sites featuring your discounts: these are searchable and often searched on mobile, by price, type and location. It is a complex picture. It is also now a case of having to serve up the right content to the right device commensurate with where that device is. This is a challenge that goes beyond just search engine optimisation to the heart of the business itself.

TECHNICAL CHALLENGES

“Developers suddenly become more important than marketers as search across all these challenges and devices becomes technical rather than marketing and brand led.”

Jake Hird, senior consultant, eConsultancy



LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

“We have to look at how SEO and location-based services fit together and the challenge is then how to use this to make sure your brand comes out on top.”

Jim Holmes, CTO, Adjust Your Set

ACHIEVING CONSISTENCY

“In this cross-channel environment, you are trying to offer the same content in multiple ways each best suited to the device, location and service being used to search for it – but without having to duplicate all the SEO work for every different channel and device and permutation.”

Graham Everitt, senior consultant, Reform



“In many cases optimising search across channels is a case of having a mobile-optimised version of your website, rather than a dedicated mobile site – that way all the basic SEO you apply to your site applies to the mobile version too,” says Jake Hird, senior analyst at eConsultancy. “The more mobile optimised your site is the higher up Google's rankings it will come as Google ranks mobile search for mobile optimisation as well as all the other factors.”

This approach of using technologies such as CSS to create optimised versions of your existing site – to the degree that it's optimised to specific devices, as well as the limitations of mobile devices – makes the SEO process slightly more

straightforward. “You use your existing SEO properties and don't have to recreate all that work again and again for each mobile version of your site,” says Hird.

But there is much more to mobile search optimisation than simply making sure that the results of any search pop up a mobile optimised version of your site on various handsets. The way people actually search is determined not just by the device they are searching on, but what they are doing and where they are doing it. This is especially true for mobile, where one of the key attributes it brings is location and immediacy.

FOUR KEY FACTORS

With traditional SEO processes – which can also be applied to mobile – there are

“ Optimising search across channels often means a mobile-optimised version of your website. The more mobile optimised your site is the higher up Google's rankings it will come as Google ranks mobile search for mobile optimisation as well as all the other factors ”

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COLUMBIA SPORTSWEAR GOES MULTICHANNEL

Columbia Sportswear on the face of it might not seem to be the kind of store that is at the cutting edge of multichannel retail and search optimisation, but the family-run business, which has gone global thanks to its ecommerce proposition, offers an object lesson in how to make the most of mobile, in-store and online retailing and in demonstrating how search optimisation has played a key role in delivering what consumers want.

According to Paul Zaengle, vice president of ecommerce for Columbia: "We saw that mobile was particularly interesting and attractive, since buyers aren't carrying laptops into the store, the smartphone and other mobile devices become critical. As they stand in the aisles and look at the product alternatives, they want to look at videos, user reviews, prices, and more – right from their mobile devices. And that was

where we felt mobile commerce could create a big win for us."

The company used its in-house team of developers – who had already built up an impressive online store front for the company – to create a mobile optimised version of its website that serviced about half the models of handsets in the market, and which account for around 90 per cent of mobile consumer interactions with the company.

The mobile offering was tailored to meet the very specific needs of people hitting the company's sites on different devices. Its online offering features all the traditional SEO, but the mobile-optimised versions are designed to serve up the search field at the top of the page as this is what mobile users are typically trying to do – find stuff quickly and simply.

The site is also designed to offer, below search, an easy-to-navigate list of

sub-categories so that users again can find things quickly and easily from the home screen with as few clicks as possible. Product details are also prevalent and consumer reviews are one of the key home page elements that Columbia has adopted as this again is often a key attribute that shoppers look for when searching on mobile.

"One of our biggest challenges and time commitments was determining which devices to support," says Zaengle. "The market is so fragmented with different platforms, different screen sizes and resolutions and features. While we see the brand-enhancing value of other types of mobile apps, we have deliberately avoided the idea of developing a mobile shopping application. That doesn't align with our strategy. We think the right shopping experience is achieved with a mobile browser and storefront."

four key things you need to do: keyword research; site optimisation so that Google can serve it up; content optimisation for all browsers and then optimisation of links on sites.

"When you apply these steps to mobile, you have to also now consider that different keywords will often be used – due to brevity – as well as more people searching for brand names as they are simple," says Graham Everitt, senior consultant, Reform. "On the technology side you also need to look at how to keep your site under 20kb per page and to use simple formats that are fast to load and easy to navigate on a mobile."

But the real challenge with search and marketing for mobile from online is that you have to optimise the content for both the device and its location, says Everitt. "You have got to make sure you have the right content on each device and appropriate to what people are doing and that means you have to really think about the back-end rather than just SEO," he says. "You don't just have one site that serves everything, rather you

have to look at having all the possible kinds of content you need and a back end that can serve that up to six, seven, eight or more different combinations."

For example, if you are looking for a shirt from M&S on mobile, you probably want a small picture and some very brief text, and some stars indicating consumer reviews. You can get more detail, but first up you want to be served simple stuff as its mobile.

If, though, you are checking in via FourSquare or Facebook, you will want maybe some content such as a video that you can then share. If you are looking online, you will want most things, although location-based information may not be the top priority.

"The challenge is to make as little duplication of effort as possible when getting all this to work," says Everitt, which is a technological challenge. And eConsultancy's Hird agrees: "Google essentially sees what technology you are using and serves it up accordingly, so cross-channel search and marketing optimisation is becoming more of an IT

or programmer/developer issue, rather than simply a marketing one," he says.

OPTIONS GALORE

And while the increasing fragmentation of retail across online, mobile, social and even connected TVs continues apace, other search options such as maps and even coupons and vouchers on third-party sites are further muddying the waters.

"While you are looking at SEO and making sure that Google sees your technology and mobile optimisation to get you up those search lists, you have to also look at things such as Google Business Listings so that when searching through non-standard search services – such as maps, AroundMe, NearMe and so on – your shops show up," says Hird.

"It is all about how traditional SEO and location-based services fit together," explains Jim Holmes, CTO at video agency Adjust Your Set. "The challenge is content based really and how to map that content to the brand and that brand to the consumer's location when they are searching and to make it immediately relevant."

Adjust Your Set works mainly in video, but it has really got under the skin of SEO and explored how it drives clicks onto branded video content. As more of its clients move to mobile, connected TV and social media, Holmes has made it his role to understand how people search and discover his content through these channels and concluded that it's all about 'relevant snippets' that can be snacked. "Brands are becoming more savvy about all this, but there is still a long way to go." he says. ■

“ You have got to make sure you have the right content on each device and appropriate to what people are doing. That means you have to really think about the back-end rather than just SEO ”



MAKE MARKETING PAY ITS WAY

CHLOE RIGBY EXAMINES SOME OF THE PRACTICAL STEPS THAT RETAILERS CAN TAKE TO ENCOURAGE SHOPPERS TO THEIR WEBSITES

Meeting customer demands for ever more relevant marketing implies great pressures on ecommerce teams. There are thousands of keywords to be optimised, marketing emails to be sent and social media sites to engage with.

How can you work effectively with often slim resources to achieve all of this? In this section we take a look at some labour-saving approaches that could be right for your business.

GET SOMEONE ELSE TO DO IT FOR YOU

Few ecommerce teams are large enough to manage the full complexity of search marketing or social media. Econsultancy's recent *UK Search Engine Marketing Benchmark Report 2011* found that while 91 per cent of client-side respondents to the study said they actively carried out search engine optimisation (SEO), 39 per cent said

they didn't have enough internal resource to make it successful.

Unsurprisingly, this is the area of marketing that retailers are most likely to outsource, according to the report, which found that in 2011 52 per cent of respondents used an agency for their SEO, with 17 per cent doing it in-house, while 29 per cent used both approaches. But it's not only search that retailers are outsourcing – and businesses may soon find they are working with a number of different agencies.

Robin Grant of social media agency We Are Social says it's important agencies work together, and with the in-house team, from the start. "Any agency will tell you it's much better to get everyone around the same table as early as possible, making sure they're all working towards common goals and working collaboratively.

It's not enough simply to hand over work to an agency or third party, points out Enda

Breslin, data strategy MD at GSI Commerce. It takes time to find the right companies to handle activities from paid search to affiliate marketing, and then it takes proper supervision to make sure everything stays on track. "Outsourcing is

“ Outsourcing is not a one-hour-a-week job, you really want to spend 50 per cent of your time on marketing, making sure it's doing what you hoped it would do ”

going to take someone in your organisation to manage it, spend time nurturing it and monitoring KPIs," he says. "It's not a one-hour-a-week job, you really want to spend 50 per cent of your time on marketing looking at numbers and making sure it's doing what you hoped it would do."

GET A MACHINE TO DO IT FOR YOU

Instead of monitoring and optimising keywords manually, retailers can automate the job. Both keywords and catalogue feeds can be automated in order to provide relevant answers and online ads to meet the customer's needs. "By taking creative and dynamically building in a product name and product price so that when someone types in 'red high heeled shoes' you've got both a product name, brand name and price associated with that creative, it increases the click-through rate," says Matt Lawson, vice-president, marketing at Marin Software. When automation is used to tie keyword responses into back-end catalogue data, shoppers searching for products will then only find them if goods are in stock.

That's important if retailers are to keep customers happy. A recent YouGov survey carried out for search marketing specialist Keybroker, found that some 42 per cent of the 2,000 online shoppers quizzed said they got frustrated when products featured in online search ads were out of stock, while almost one in three said they had found inaccurate pricing in search ads.

When Bathrooms.com, advised by Net Media Planet, joined its back end and PPC campaign together, it saw sales rise by 57 per cent. The link meant that pricing information and availability were updated across the adverts in near real-time. When a product sold out, the PPC advert linked to that product would be switched off. "This meant that when a product sold out the PPC advert linked to that product/deal would be switched off and Bathrooms.com did not pay for a click that could not result in a sale," says Net Media Planet's managing director, Sri Sharma.

Automating transactional emails is also a relatively simple task, says Richard Evans of Silverpop. In theory – and barring design changes – once an email has been built it can be set for mailing when the relevant trigger occurs on the website, and then left. The technology required, he says, involves spending between £2,000 and £3,000 to link retailers' email management systems to their web analytics, but that cost is generally recouped quickly. "Our clients are all dealing with limited human resources," he says, "and by automating more of these

TURN ON THE TECH

"Once you reach the point where you're large enough that you're having trouble cataloguing manually it makes sense to turn to automation."

Matt Lawson, vice-president, marketing, Marin Software



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY



CONTENT IS KING

"If you're writing interesting and relevant content that is of interest to influencers... people are going to link to and talk about those blog posts – and that's a central part of both an SEO and a social strategy."

Robin Grant, managing director, We Are Social

ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS

"It is the basic premise that if you show people what they are interested in, they will respond."

Michael Steckler, managing director, Northern Europe, Criteo



triggered email programmes they're actually able to drive significant portions of their email revenue without having to come in every single day and think about how it's going to happen."

BRING IN VISITORS FROM OTHER PEOPLE'S WEBSITES

It's long been suspected that social buzz around your product and brand can be an effective way to raise awareness and bring visitors to your site. But recent research from Experian Hitwise suggests that for every fan gained on a retailer's Facebook page, a merchant will enjoy an extra 20 visits to its website, potentially boosting sales. It also found that top retailers can expect to see, on average, 62,000 visitors coming its way from Facebook every month, even if they don't have any fans. Building a Facebook following can, it seems, have a very positive impact on sales.

This will appeal to retailers such as Topshop and New Look, who have the most Facebook fans, according to the first Channel Advisor Facebook UK Commerce Index, published this June. At the time of its research, Topshop had 1.4 million fans, while second-placed New Look had 978,000.

Facebook's own figures show that the 500 million people who actively use the site spend a combined total of 700 billion minutes there. Retailers are tapping into this potential audience in a variety of ways, from adding the Facebook 'Like' button to

their sites, to using Facebook data to inform the recommendations they make.

Amazon.com customers who link their accounts to Facebook, for example, will not only receive recommendations based on their Facebook likes, but they will also be told when one of their Facebook friends is about to celebrate a birthday and will receive gift recommendations.

Sites such as ASOS have taken the step of having their own shop within the Facebook platform, while Marks & Spencer recently launched its own micropage with suggestions for Fathers' Day gifts. Visitors who clicked on an item were redirected to the M&S site for more information or to checkout.





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James Scott, Managing Director of ChannelAdvisor

“ For Mcommerce, with 70% of attendees being either an e-tailer or a multi-channel retailer, the audience was perfect. Likewise was the NEC location, which we prefer over London venues as it means easier parking, hotels and access. The show was both cost-effective and well-attended, meaning we received a significantly greater number and quality of leads than we expected. ”

Robert Masson, Managing Director of Mcommerce

For any queries, please contact: Email: info@internetretailing.net, Tel: 01733 584 5763

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Moving beyond Facebook, many retailers use Twitter accounts for customer service, answering queries and dealing with complaints.

REACHING OUT

But brands and retailers wanting to be found through social media should also reach beyond Facebook and Twitter. Working with affiliate agencies to spread commission-generating links around a variety of relevant websites is a highly practical step towards building inbound traffic. But moving away from paid links, Robin Grant, managing director of social media agency We Are Social says it's important to reach out to the most influential bloggers in your sector to encourage people to write about your site and to link to it. Additionally, lots of businesses run a blog on their own site. Grant says this works best to raise site visibility if the blog is on the same top-level domain as the website. That means the address should be anyretailer.com/blog, rather than blog.anyretailer.com since inbound links will have a 'halo' effect on the rest of the site's content.

ANATOMY OF A SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGN

We Are Social worked with Tesco on a social media campaign to raise the profile of Clothing at Tesco. Tools included a Lifestyled blog, featuring posts showing off the range and guest blogs from fashion bloggers. Customer conversations were held through a Twitter account while a Facebook page was created to discuss subjects such as possible extensions to the range.


Campaigns within the Lifestyled blog included a week-long Twitter competition to win clothes, which added 400 new

Twitter followers and reached almost 0.75m Twitter users. Influential fashion bloggers reviewed the collection and their 17 blog posts attracted 172 comments and reached 0.74m people. On Facebook, a Friday Frenzy flash sale offered 50 per cent off to all fans – winning 40,000 new fans. Tesco said the campaign had brought it sales worth £1.1 million.

Grant says the work is an example of how social media campaigns can prove some significant returns. But, he adds: "Social media isn't a direct response medium. The owned and earned side of social media, what we're most interested in here, does tend to be much more akin to brand advertising campaigns where you're measuring much softer brand metrics over a period of time rather than direct response to ads."

KEEPING TABS ON WHAT'S WORKING

If you have a number of different online strategies it's important to know what's actually working for your strategy. Marketing providers add codes to their technology to track and report on their particular campaign's success. These can slow down the website, as well as potentially being complex to manage. By using tag management, retailers can remove the tags from a page and see the answers reported in a way that shows the exact path a customer takes to a sale.



As distinct patterns emerge, campaigns can be planned to make the most of the way customers tend to come to your site.

Moving to a tag management system can be lengthy and complicated, while also potentially ruffling feathers both inside and outside the organisation, says Bertie Stevenson, head of international sales for TagMan. But, he says: "Although going through the implementation of a tag management system and the insight it delivers can be an uncomfortable experience for you, your colleagues and your providers, it is an invaluable one in evaluating all the online activity your business undertakes and why." ■

“ A tag management system is invaluable for evaluating all the online activity your business undertakes and why ”

RETARGETING IN ACTION

Women's occasionwear brand Coast saw that hundreds of thousands of visitors to its site were leaving without buying, costing it millions in lost revenue. It used retargeting technology from Criteo to find website visitors after they left the site and show them advertising created for them personally, to represent them with the items they looked at on the Coast website.

Coast was also able to segment customers who had left the website after buying in order to cross-sell them complementary products – while ensuring they did not see the same products they had just bought.

The technology helped Coast to an initial

return on investment of £15 for every £1 spent. That figure rose to £18 for every £1 after optimisation of the campaign. During the first 12 weeks of 2011, it resulted in sales worth £250,000.

Jason Nelson, head of ecommerce at Coast said: "All marketing activity at Coast exists within a strategic cycle of test, refine, optimise that is measured against a strict KPI criteria using an RFM (recency, frequency, monetary value) matrix by customer/visitor segment. Working with Criteo allows us to profitably target visitors with a highly relevant message while they are still warm."

Michael Steckler, managing director for

Northern Europe at Criteo, says 95 per cent of visitors leave ecommerce sites without buying. "The greatest benefit of retargeting has to be its ability to convert browsers into buyers at the right time – when they are considering a purchase."

The technology works by taking prices, images and any offers or promotions from the product feed, usually provided in xml or csv format, and which can be updated frequently when stock levels and prices are changing fast. The ad creative used fits the advertiser's brand guidelines, but every factor from when and where the ad is displayed to which products are shown is optimised by the retargeting engine.

HOW TO GET FOUND IN CYBERSPACE

The time when a successful search strategy could be measured purely by how high your brand appeared in Google's search results is long past.

Today in a more mature online retailing industry, the smart money is no longer purely directed at that number one listing on the most popular search engines. Costs and competition have both increased and a targeted approach makes more financial sense.

After all, points out Martin Dinham, director at search agency Guava, being top on Google's results page is simply "not a business objective". Rather, he says, "A business objective is making a return on the investment you spent to do that."

That's just as true when it comes to other ways of driving traffic to your website, such as email or affiliate links. So what does a good search and performance marketing strategy look like?

UNDERSTANDING THE SEARCHERS

UK shoppers are today more willing than ever to buy online, and a plethora of choice has arisen in response. Getting your brand found among all those names is, unsurprisingly, much more difficult. The variety of choice on offer means consumers are changing the way they

search. They're looking not just for the item they need, but for the retailer who will supply it fastest, cheapest and in the most convenient manner.

But a recent Forrester report, *The Future of Search Marketing*, which examined the US market, found that while in the last five years consumers and search engines have changed their approach to search, advertisers have not.

Forrester analyst Shar VanBoskirk, the author of the report, explains the backdrop to why retailers must adapt: "To accommodate the glut of searchable content, search engines are slowly transforming from lists of web links into content curators that can read images and Flash files, and tailor results to location and prior behaviour. For example, Microsoft's Bing determines what content to serve searchers based on search terms, user profiles, and social media trends. And Yahoo! and Google both now offer richer search ad formats that support images, video, and, soon, dynamic product information."

In the UK, Hitwise research for June 2011 showed that hard on the heels of Google UK as a forum for search come Facebook and You Tube.

Being found today is about understanding your brand's demographic and how it is likely to search, whether on

social media, a search engine or through video. A key part of your search strategy then, is researching just that.

It's also important to remember that not only are consumers making their enquiries more specific, but that they have a multichannel mindset in which stores may be as important as online stores. They want to know not just who sells a product but where they can buy it and what people are saying about it. These are all questions it makes sense to answer on your site by emphasising locations and reviews in your site data.

Meanwhile it's no longer enough to spend your search marketing budget on broad search terms such as 't-shirts', says Nick Beck of Tug Search. Why? "It's very hard to get a profitable sale," he says.

If you have an already well-known brand, already promoted through PR, then it's likely that consumers will be searching for your name directly. If not, says Beck, it's worth allocating some budget towards building awareness using broader key words in your sector. Thus, a company that assesses its brand as about cool t-shirts could put money into 'cool t-shirts' as a search term.

But don't just back a hunch: find out what your potential customers are searching for by judicious use of some free tools, such as Google AdWords or Google Trends to work out what words

TODAY IT'S HARDER THAN EVER TO GET YOUR BRAND FOUND AMONG THE INTERNET'S PLETHORA OF CONTENT. CHLOE RIGBY LOOKS AT THE KEY PILLARS OF A STRATEGY AIMING AT MAKING YOUR NAME STAND OUT

consumers are using to search for products like yours. Take time to look at your competitors and their metatags to see what terms they are using to promote their sites in natural search.

It's worth the time, says Kimberly Read, senior director of search and creative services at LinkShare, because being relevant – and continuously testing your website for relevancy – can bring down the cost per click significantly. “The best experience for a search engine is to provide the most relevant results,” she says, “so what they do is basically reward advertisers who provide very relevant results, and that relevancy is rewarded in better positions at lower costs. It might take more time up front to get more targeted but that time is very well worth it and might reduce your costs.”

PPC OR NATURAL SEARCH?

For a retailer, pay-per-click search is likely to be a prime driver of traffic to your website. According to the Forrester report, it accounts for 60 per cent of most marketers' interactive spend, and is their primary tool for acquiring new customers.

On the other hand, natural search is more likely to build awareness of your brand over the long term. For while pay-per-click campaigns can be turned on and off as required – each click through from a banner ad or paid-for search

result at the top of a search engine page that leads to your website is paid for – natural search builds gradually over time. That's because natural search reflects the perceived usefulness of your site as an answer to consumers' questions as judged by the web spiders of search engines, which crawl the Internet and feed back data about websites' usefulness.

So rather than choosing between natural search and PPC, it's likely that you'll be looking at integrating the two.

HOW DO YOU DO WELL IN SEARCH?

Few know the exact secret of Google's algorithms, but best-practice experience tells us that to score well in natural search, you'll need relevant and regularly updated content, as well as more in-depth information.

To this end, your strategy might include a website-based blog, while regularly used forums also help your site to score highly in search results. That's

because all of this means that consumers will be more likely to find the information they're looking for on your site. Relevancy to the search is important. Planning ahead is also key to ensure that you get your results coming through at a time that suits your business's seasonal peaks and troughs.

Harking back to the idea of targeting, to do well in pay-per-click, you'll have click-through banner ads placed strategically on the type of websites that are read by your demographic. Video ads are currently growing in popularity, so having an entertaining or informative piece of video that links to your site will play well.

YOU HAVE MAIL

While search is key for acquiring new customers, when it comes to bringing them back, email marketing, it's generally agreed, cannot be beaten. According to figures from the North America's Direct Marketing Association, a \$47 return can

“ Being top on Google's results page is not a business objective. Rather, a business objective is making a return on the investment you spent to do that ”

be expected for every \$1 spent on email. And even more successful than that, says Richard Evans of email marketing company Silverpop, are transactional emails, sent when an existing shoppers abandons a cart or checks out. After-sales emails can be effective, as can those triggered by the anniversary of a buy or a customer's birthday. "There's nothing more relevant," says Evans, "than sending me something that's triggered based on a behaviour I just took because I'm thinking about your brand, I'm already engaged with it, anticipating some kind of interaction, you catch me at that time and it's actually very potent."

But, warns Evans, while email is a good way to encourage repeat business from existing customers it is not a good way to acquire new ones. More effective here, he argues, is the use of social media. Fans who sign up to a Facebook page, for example, can easily be given an exclusive offer or discount to encourage them to sign up to a mailing list. Facebook's own figures show that on average each Facebook member has 130 friends – collateral not to be sniffed at.

LINKED IN TO YOUR SITE

The final key way to bring visitors to your site is to get embedded in the editorial content of other sites. A simple press release can result in a powerfully effective link from a media site to yours, while getting talked about in social media can generate links from blogs, forums, Twitter, Facebook and other mediums to your site. Another action you can take to generate such links is to raise your profile and cultivate relationships with influential bloggers.

Just as in search there's an awareness-raising side to this and a paid search side, through affiliate links where retailers pay for clickthroughs. Affiliate links, says LinkShare's Read, are becoming more sophisticated in just the same way as paid search. Just as Google is adding in new features and

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

"Making sure you're present at the right time of year for the right products is relatively easy for paid search because you're able to put your presence up and increase it very quickly; with natural search it requires a lot of planning."
Martin Dinham, director, Guava



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY



EMAIL MATTERS

"You have to find ways as a retailer to use email to deliver those relevant and engaging communications that are actually going to be interacted with. If you don't and use bulk broadcast email, your days are going to be numbered."
Richard Evans, marketing director, EMEA, Silverpop

THE ROLE OF PAID SEARCH

"When I look at affiliate marketing and paid search I think of it in terms of interest: affiliate marketing is often creating that interest by creating offers and giving advertisers a place to put offers. What paid search does is responding to that interest."

Kimberly Read,
senior director of search and creative services at LinkShare



capabilities, so publishers are moving beyond the simple website and link to retailers' sites. Today there are video platforms, mobile apps, social shopping platforms and more to consider.

Meanwhile, Enda Breslin, VP strategy and client services at GSI Commerce says affiliate connections can be simple and effective for products where it's possible to be tightly targeted. "If you're in an area where you can target niche customers fairly easily you can use affiliates pretty easily," he says. "If you're selling scuba diving equipment it's pretty easy to identify scuba diving forums. But if you have a massive range, like Toys R Us, it's hard to find one affiliated group."

COSTING IT – AND MEASURING IT

So how much is all this going to cost? Breslin recommends that 10-15 per cent

of revenue should be put back into marketing the website. Of that the biggest expenditure – around 60 per cent – will be on paid search. But a new launch could easily spend all of its budget on paid search as it looks to raise awareness of the site and get a new name known, and then balance that with email marketing and other channels at a later stage on the maturity curve.

When it comes to measuring how you're doing, the best KPI of all, our experts generally agree, is return on investment. "With one retailer we were working with the finance director, and on a weekly basis he demanded we show profitability at a keyword level," says Beck. "He wanted to know how much profit he was making on the back of each of his thousands of keywords every week. You can go to that degree." For Breslin the most important metrics are the conversion rate and the cost per lead. "You can see over time on a spreadsheet if you're spending too much time on email, is it getting worse, going in the right direction? What works for you?"

When everything can be measured, checking that those measurements are working for you is just as important as setting out your strategy in the first place. ■

“ There’s nothing more relevant than sending me something based on a behaviour I just took because I’m thinking about your brand. You catch me at that time and it’s actually very potent ”

THE PRISMSTAR PRODUCT SELECTOR INCREASES CONVERSION RATES BY OVER 70 PER CENT



Two critical issues in online retail are persuading browsing customers to complete a purchase, and ensuring they purchase a product that is right for them. An effective product search solution can achieve both of these objectives by increasing buyer confidence, leading to higher conversion rates, fewer product returns and more repeat business, as demonstrated by PrismaStar's selector at Mall.cz.

Mall.cz is an online retailer serving the Czech Republic, selling everything from consumer electronics to white goods to cosmetics. Mall.cz has experienced phenomenal levels of success with the PrismaStar HTML selector since deployment in early 2011, with the increase in conversion rates being particularly impressive.

SIMPLE TO INTEGRATE

Mall.cz found the selector simple to integrate. They provided PrismaStar with a feed of their product data; PrismaStar provided them with a few lines of code to embed the selector in their website. Integration of the HTML selector with 600 categories on the Mall.cz site took only 12 days from provision of release candidate and then a production version for acceptance testing to the selector going live.

"The integration was quick and easy," says Petr Kral of Mall.cz. "We supplied PrismaStar with our data. They provided us with the user interface for our website, and it took less than two weeks from seeing the release candidate to having the selector running live."

IMPROVED CONVERSION RATES

Following integration, the PrismaStar selector has been running alongside Mall.cz's own standard filter search. The selector has shown dramatically better conversion rates, with the average conversion rate over a one-month period for all product categories combined increasing by over 70 per cent. The daily improvement in conversion rates was frequently well above 100 per cent.

Figure 1 shows the conversion rates for each day during that period.

STANDING OUT FROM THE CROWD

The PrismaStar selector features a state-of-the-art, intuitive user interface, fully customisable to fit with clients' corporate branding or marketing strategy. In the case of Mall.cz, they requested that the search results be displayed in a grid, three products across (see Figure 2). This keeps the selector's appearance in line with the rest of their

website, yet it retains the eye-catching dynamic, real-time sorting of results that really sets the PrismaStar selector apart.

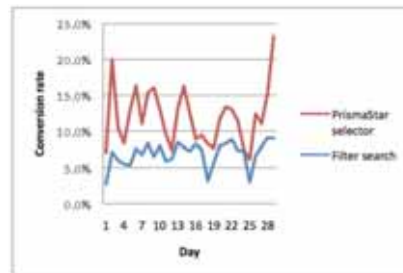


Figure 1: Comparison of conversion rates between standard filter search and the PrismaStar selector on the Mall.cz website

STRUCTURED DATA

PrismaStar has an extensive and ever-expanding database of product data for a wide range of categories, including consumer electronics and white goods. This data is maintained in the Data Normalization Application (DNA) system, enables PrismaStar to take poor-quality or incomplete data and fill in the gaps, returning complete, extensive and accurate data to the customer.

In the case of Mall.cz, they opted to use their own product data without any optimisation by PrismaStar. The Mall.cz data was imported to DNA and supplied it to the selector on the Mall.cz site – a simple and efficient process requiring minimal input from Mall.cz.

REPORTING

The PrismaStar Client Portal gives our clients access to extensive metrics on the performance of the selector, including unique visitors, click-through and conversion rates, product features active on click-through, and more.

Mall.cz received detailed traffic, attribute interaction, and product reports, allowing them total insight into the way their customers interact with the selector. For example, they were able to see that 29 per cent of people purchasing mobile phones were interested in the phone's memory capacity, and 13 per cent in the Android operating system – invaluable information for planning promotions and stock management, etc.

INCREASING CONSUMER CONFIDENCE TO MAKE THE SALE

An effective product search solution needs to provide shoppers with complete, in-depth, easy-to-navigate product data presented in an intuitive user interface. Often the 'perfect product', including every

desirable feature at minimal price, just doesn't exist; so an effective solution also needs to allow the shopper to trade-off certain features that they simply can't have, in order to find the closest match to their needs.

The patented technology behind the PrismaStar selector complements this natural decision-making behaviour. The selector helps consumers find their ideal product faster by sorting the best possible match based upon their buying criteria, and allowing them to trade-off features for the best match.

INCREASED CUSTOMER LIFETIME VALUE

The knock-on effects of customer satisfaction are well known: happy customers bring repeat business and fewer returns; unsatisfied customers return unwanted products and tell their friends about their bad experiences – and are notoriously difficult to win back. The PrismaStar selector increases customer satisfaction by ensuring shoppers find exactly what they're looking for, resulting in fewer returns and more repeat business.



Figure 2: The PrismaStar selector on the Mall.cz website

MULTICHANNEL SOLUTION

The PrismaStar selector is also available as a multichannel solution for use on in-store touchscreen kiosks. Indeed, Vodafone UK has recently deployed the selector in-store in Edinburgh.

SUMMARY

As evidenced by the above case study, the PrismaStar selector:

- is simple to integrate;
 - increases conversion rates;
 - improves customer lifetime value; and
 - stands out from the competition.
- provides structured product data
- Mall.cz has seen the very real benefits of the PrismaStar selector in terms of a significant increase in conversion rates. ■

SEARCHING FOR SALES

INSIDE A DECADE, SEARCH HAS GONE FROM BEING PRIMARILY A GEEKS' CONCERN TO THE PRIMARY WAY CONSUMERS NAVIGATE THE WEB. WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR RETAILERS TRYING TO DRIVE ONLINE SALES?
JONATHAN WRIGHT INVESTIGATES



NET-A-PORTER LIVE

Designer clothes retailer Net-A-Porter is a company that's being hugely imaginative in its efforts to reach customers. It has its own magazine posted online for customers to browse, for example, and its own YouTube channel.

It's also combining the idea of using the data generated by its own sales with recommendations in Net-A-Porter Live. This is a part of its site that offers a snapshot of what customers are buying globally. When another customer buys an item you like, customers can click on it to save it in a wishlist or show the item to friends via Facebook.

In an era when the idea of being on trend is becomingly central to the wider culture, it's an imaginative sales tool. Because it's a

page that's constantly being updated, it's also fascinating, albeit in a watching-the-elections-results-and-getting-caught-in-the-screenglow style if you hang around too long.

"Visitors to our offices have always been drawn to our screens showing real-time purchases, and Net-A-Porter Live is essentially a modified version of this experience," says Natalie Massenet, the company's chairman and founder. "Seeing which items are being selected by other customers creates an excitement around certain products, and further to that, we expect that offering the ability to share these choices with others will turn into a powerful selling tool that will be unleashed worldwide."

marketing agency Found, "what we're seeing is that social is very much muscling in on things."

GO WITH THE FLOW

Taking all these factors together, search is an area that poses huge challenges for retailers and yet, because it is so ubiquitous, if you can reach customers during the search process, it's clearly a powerful sales driver. But how best to go about this?

It's first crucial to recognise that there's no point in going against the grain of what customers want to do. Instead, a starting point is to try better to understand how search works, beginning with an appreciation of who's searching.

"Think about the way offline planners spend enormous amounts of time understanding their audience," says Ed Lamb. "Every last detail of their lives is considered to ensure appropriate targeting of communications material. And yet the audience for search – a medium that is often used by customers already looking to buy – is not considered in anywhere near as much depth."

He gives a specific example of why this is important. "We spend a fair bit of our time explaining to offline retailers that the brands they may see as their competitors on the high street are often not their competitors when it comes to a particular search term," he says. "Often big corporations are competing with tiny specialists who operate in a niche."

It's also crucial to remember that customers make different kinds of searches. Not every search is about immediately making a purchase. Potential customers might instead begin by looking at product comparison websites or, perhaps if they've begun to settle on a single product, user

reviews. Companies need to understand how these searches work and target efforts accordingly, in particular on the moment when customers are ready to buy, however customers arrive at this.

Think about a customer who's ready to purchase, but searching on a generic term such as 'gazebo', says Tina Judic. This is when retailers really need to stand out from the crowd. (After all, how many of us have preferred gazebo suppliers?...)" "This is the key point where the results that are presented to them in their search findings have to be as specific as they can be and have that call to action," she says. That might be an advert that uses the precise search terms the customer has used or even a 30 per cent off deal.

This is, of course, a simple and straightforward example and there are plenty of other methods to draw in customers [see the web interface and merchandising features for more]. But whatever methods are used, it's crucial both to have clear performance goals (new customer acquisition, building

“ When it comes to search terms, big corporations are often competing with tiny specialists who operate in a niche ”

Not for the first time in these supplements, let's begin with a memory of the New Economy crash-and-burn years. Back then, I was working on the short-lived UK version of *Business 2.0* and, largely unsuccessfully, attempting to extract some useful information from a search engine that's still much used today. My boss leaned over. "Do you not know about Google?" he asked.

Today, Google has become a verb, so much so that BBC presenters routinely advise people to "Google" search terms and then, so as not to be seen to be showing favouritism, hurriedly add that "other search engines are available".

For anyone who wants to reach out to customers via search, the very success of Google has led to a strange situation, summed up by Giles Colborne, managing director of usability experts cpartners. "[Search is] almost invisible because it's so ubiquitous," he says. "With mobile, no matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, people are diving into search to find stuff. Search is part of that extended brain in the outside world, or memory in the outside, for which people use technology."

In other words, customers' attitude to search, and this wasn't true even a decade ago, is that it's something they expect to be able to do without really thinking too much about it. In addition, adds Colborne, they expect the results they get back to be "increasingly accurate". Search, in some sense, has become like a utility, something we all take for granted, at least until there's an outage or a major problem.

For retailers that need to get products in front of consumers, there are other complications too. In particular, while there's plenty of evidence to suggest they don't think too deeply about what they're doing, customers still drive search. "Users have total control," says Ed Lamb, planning and project director with travel and fashion SEO agency propellernet. "They type in their search query and they click on the search result that looks best to them."

Leaving aside for now how far search engines slant results based on previous surfing (currently a subject of some controversy), there's a further layer of complexity in that this is a dynamic area that's constantly changing. "What we're now seeing with search is that users are becoming more savvy and they're not just looking to a search engine to provide their search results," says Tina Judic, managing director of search and performance

sales, etc) and to measure these. “Brands should plan all digital activity, including search, on a cost per outcome (CPO) model,” advises Ed Turner, managing director of digital agency Gum. “Looking beyond the basic currency metrics to what the end result is and evaluating the campaigns on a CPO basis, be that awareness, arrivals, sales, registrations etc, will ensure ROI is increased.”

THE SOCIAL FACTOR

But whatever metrics are applied, companies can't see search purely in mechanistic terms. Intrinsic to the idea of customer engagement is the idea of having a conversation, finding out what customers want and reacting. This isn't a one-time deal. Ideally, you don't just want to get customers' attention, you want to keep it and build a long-term relationship. (Gazebos, after all, don't last forever.)

Now consider this idea in the context of the cross-channel environment that we're entering. At a time when many companies worry about how to track customers across different devices and places, maybe it's time instead to take a step back and realise that it's possible to get too fixated on trying to work out *exactly* what people are doing.

An alternative is to flip this around and think about what your company can offer customers. Giles Colborne of cx partners points out that most customers don't want to get the very, very best deal, they want to get a deal that's good enough, that they feel comfortable with. “What people buy is trust and that's the essence of any transaction,” he says.

Looked at through this prism, every search is about finding that trust. If you can not only provide that, but build on it, this can be a powerful sales tool. Indeed, a major motivation for customers in retail searches, says Gary Preston, strategy director with propellernet, is to find “a trusted source or an expert” to help with a purchase decision.

“Many retailers have yet to appreciate the full value of [this] from a search and conversion perspective,” he says. “By investing in ‘expert’ content you stand a chance of becoming visible to consumers further up in the search journey. Perhaps

SOCIAL WHIRL

“My feeling is that users want to have more of a social engagement rather than have a computer tell them, or an advertiser tell them, what they should be looking for. They're looking for that greater interaction.”
Tina Judic, managing director, Found



WHAT THE EXPERTS SAY



NEW PARADIGM

“At Gum we are working with a range of brands to explore different ways they can use search to engage with and disrupt the consumer from their usual patterns, which ultimately builds longer term relationships. It isn't just about signposting anymore, it is about offering up relevant and useful content direct to the user at all stages of their purchase cycle.”
Ed Turner, managing director, Gum

ACT NATURALLY

“While many online retailers are doing some great search work, there are just as many that have completely missed the opportunity and continue to misalign marketing spend versus where they could make revenue returns, particularly in natural search which really can transform a company. There's still a misunderstanding that SEO is a technical discipline only and that it can be ‘covered’ with very small budget levels. The reality is that natural search is a creative discipline supported by technical rigour, utilising PR and social marketing techniques heavily.”
Ed Lamb, planning and project director, propellernet



REVIEWS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

“What people look for in reviews is the review that they would write in three months time, that would be a customer's ideal review. And because they can't see that what they want is reviews by somebody just like me. So when people read reviews they're doing two things: they're evaluating the product but also they're evaluating the reviewer to see whether or not they believe them.”
Giles Colborne, managing director, cxpartners

more importantly you create an asset that people can recommend, link to, re-tweet and share.” This can in turn lead to improvements in natural search visibility.

As to how far retailers should go down the content-is-king route, that depends partly on the brand, but an example of what can be done, says Gum's Ed Turner, is the Converse Domaination campaign (<http://vimeo.com/8254341>), which didn't work from keywords associated with shoes, but used data from Google Zeitgeist to

inspire, for example, a search engine spelling bee.

Granted, this may not work for a more conservative retailer, but it's a powerful indicator of what can be done as search becomes increasingly driven by social media. We'll probably need to refine metrics in order to track how such campaigns work, especially when you factor in mobile as well as social commerce, but that doesn't mean that retailers can duck such challenges.

To return to where we began, search is ubiquitous, a part of everyday life, early proof even of cyberpunk author William Gibson's recent comment that “the distinction we now insist on drawing between [real and virtual worlds] will eventually seem quaint and arbitrary”. As we go forwards, efforts to engage customers that don't recognise this truth are likely to be increasingly doomed to failure. ■

“What people buy is trust and that's the essence of any transaction”

In retail, online search is about far more than finding a product, buying that item and then logging off, job done. It's not that simple because shopping isn't just about logic, it's also about emotion.

That's to say, as well as finding the product, consumers are also looking for the retailer they feel they want to do business with. Even that's an over-simplification because search can also be about customers working out what the exact product is that they need, or finding that an item they thought they needed isn't the thing at all – and that something else fits the bill. Many potential customers are window-shopping online, hoping to be inspired to buy that nebulous something that will improve or brighten up their lives.

Behind all of this lies a great deal of emotion: at root many feel that the right

product is out there somewhere, if only they can find it. Sometimes online shoppers think they have to kiss a lot of frogs in order to find their prince – but when they do find the right retailer they can feel genuine warmth towards them.

Not only is search impelled by emotion, it is also likely to lead to strong emotions: frustration if the item can't be found, disappointment if the retailer they eventually opt for doesn't meet their expectations, and delight when it all works out and they find the perfect product, in the right colour at a good price, and with free delivery into the bargain.

When these emotions are strongly felt, it's more likely that shoppers will express those emotions on the internet, with poor or excellent ratings, recommendations and general chat about the retailer. The excitement of a good purchase is as much

relayed today online as it ever was in the markets of medieval England. Today, however, the audience is potentially mammoth, and also exists not only in the present but in the future when the reputations our collective reviews and ratings may help influence purchases that haven't yet been thought of.

To loop back to where we came in, that means in search and performance marketing the task of the retailer is about more than coming top of the search engine listings. It's about being found in positive contexts across the web, it's about inspiring confidence and it's about establishing a trusting relationship with existing customers – for when potential new customers come along it's only too easy for them to find references to good or poor customer service across the internet.

So well as generating the awareness that comes with good SEO, or proposing the offers that encourage strong affiliate links, it's also about delivering on promises and considering what it is the customer wants of you in order to take your relationship forward – or for them to place more orders. All the techniques we've discussed in this supplement have their place here, from email marketing to paid search and the use of social media as places to be found.

But it's also about making sure that your core business of retailing is still delivering what customers want and inspiring trust. The risks for those who fail to do that are great, since perceived shortcomings get amplified in cyberspace. On the flipside, inspire great trust and that will also be reflected across the internet. For while there are plenty of 'good enough' retailers, truly great customer service can be hard to find, and shoppers will repay those merchants who do go the extra mile by telling others and referring on their friends and family.

The basic truth to be realised here is that customers also have their own reputations and relationships to maintain, online as well as offline. That means they will spread the word for free, as long as the retailer is truly trustworthy, rather than purely because they're being offered an incentive or discount.

This supplement is the latest in *Internet Retailing's* series of supplements. Each explores questions facing retailers today through six key aspects: web interface, merchandising, cross-channel experience, logistics, strategy and customer engagement. We welcome your input and suggestions for future themes at editor@internetretailing.net

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