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Site Search: If You Build It Correctly, They Will Buy

BY ERIN LYNCH

Here is a riddle: What is one of the most important features on your website, but also one that most retailers tend to let slide?

The answer is site search—and if done correctly, site search can reduce site abandonment, increase conversion rates (and sales), and boost customer engagement.

Think about it, if the shopper can't find it on your ecommerce site, the shopper can't buy it from your ecommerce site.

In fact, site search is so important that studies have found that if it's not done right 73% of consumers will abandon your site out of pure frustration.

### Site Search is Trending as a Main Focus

More retailers are picking up on Multichannel Merchant's importance of optimizing search results. According to the MCM Outlook 2013, when asked what future additions retailers planned to make to their site within the next 12 months, 33% said advanced search/more search capabilities, 30% said personalized recommendations, 20.5% said offering dynamic images, and 11.5% said item availability.

Both B2B and B2C merchants are stepping up their site search in an effort to convert browsers coming to their websites

into buyers. But B2C merchants are offering different site search functions than their B2B counterparts, according to the results of the MCM Outlook 2013 survey.

While more B2C merchants are focused on the ability to refine results and thumbnail images being offered with the results, more B2B merchants are offering customers guided navigation.

Overall, the MCM Outlook 2013 survey found that 61.3% of respondents said they offer site searchers the ability to refine results. That includes 63.8% of B2C respondents and 59.1% of B2Bs. Also, 51.3% of all respondents said they offer thumbnail

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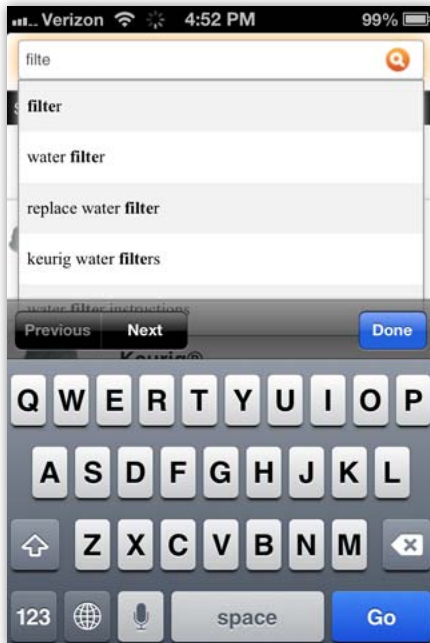
An auto complete function for mobile users is imperative. Coffee company Keurig uses an auto complete to show the most popular items as they are being typed on a mobile phone search bar. This can save the search time and frustration.

images with results. That includes 56.5% of B2B respondents and 43.2% of B2Bs.

Guided navigation is being used by 43.9% of respondents. However, more than half (51.5%) of B2C respondents said they use guided navigation, compared to 37.9% of B2B respondents.

Getting Started

The first hurdle retailers need to get past when creating a search friendly site is to accept the fact that not every shopper is going to make a purchase. Some shoppers stumble upon your page through an external search engine, while some are there to research a product, to compare prices, or to simply window shop.

While a visitor might not be ready to buy today, with the help of site search, retailers can push a visitor down the path to purchase by offering compelling copy with great visuals.

Location, Location, Location

More often than not, the first time someone enters your website, they come by way of your homepage. And while it would be nice to be able to put every single product you are selling front and center, it will never happen. Hence the reason why the search bar—and its placement—is essential.

Retailers should always place the site search box in a consistent location, such as the upper middle or upper right portion of your site. It should be prominent on the page and stand out against other logos, icons, or messages. This will help it pop in the eyes of your visitor and become a separate entity on your site.

Inside the search box, make sure there is some text such as "Search Products" or "Get Help Here," which will let the consumer know what options the shopper has. This will also help distinguish the site search box from other commonly used homepage boxes such as email sign up or logins.

Searchers should also have an auto complete option when typing queries.

Keeping Drop Downs Simple

Another key factor in letting a visitor easily navigate throughout your site is the dropdown menu of your page. Dropdown menus can help your visitor find what he or she is looking for before even attempting a search bar query. This could be labeled anything from "Footwear" to "Men's" or "Kitchen," depending on the merchandise you sell.

One major mistake that should be avoided at all costs is to overload the dropdown tabs with options. Retailers need to avoid the kitchen sink approach, as too many options can overwhelm your visitor.

When designing your dropdowns, omit less popular inventory. If a shopper doesn't

find what he or she is looking for right from the start, the shopper will abandon your site altogether.

A good way to decide what items to include in your dropdown menus would be to look at the main categories of products that you sell, and then analyze the most popular keywords on your site.

Optimizing Your Search Results

Searching a site is no longer about typing a certain word or product into a box. Gone are the days when a shopper would type "black sweater," now consumers have modified their searching behavior by using sophisticated search queries, scrolling through product images, reading recommendations, researching products and finding the best price.

Based on these behavioral changes, retailers must in turn adjust the way they think about search marketing and online advertising. This is also why every product page should include validation, reviews, specs and price. This is the heart of your product page and what will convince your visitor to buy.

Product information should always include product features, specifications and benefits. It should offer the customer the next best thing to being in a traditional bricks-and-mortar store. Retailers need to include as much information as possible in order to keep a visitor engaged.

As the old saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words," hence why the images you decide to post on your site are extremely important. Think of your product images as an extension of your brand and of the store experience. Retailers should use high resolution images that can give a shopper confidence in the product they are buying online.

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> **How important are facets to apparel site search? Find out in this video from SLI Systems CEO Shaun Ryan and Kevin Metz of Caché** [bit.ly/mcm-facets]

Since your online visitor is not in the traditional bricks-and-mortar store, he or she cannot see or feel your products. This also means the customer cannot try apparel on, see how clothing fits or how products work. Instead of uploading simple images of the product, try uploading images being worn by a model (if it's apparel), or being used in action.

Enhanced views and additional images allow the shopping experience to become interactive. Make sure your photos allow for additional angle views, zoom options, enlarge photo options, and if you can, add a facet that includes instructional videos or product videos.

Not only do consumers want to know everything about the product, but they want it fast and offered without hassle.

Video

While many retailers are still looking at product videos as marketing tactics and uploading them to Facebook, YouTube, or even Vine, the trend for a majority of retailers is to include video within product pages and search results. Retailers are finding out when you do so, it gets customers more interested in your brand. In fact, studies show that video is proven to improve conversions and engagement of your online visitors with your products and content. Studies have also found that when product videos are available on an ecommerce site, one-third of your visitors will watch them—and people who view videos are 85% more likely to make a purchase.

If you can embed product videos in your product pages, then it needs to be done. Nearly 40% of merchants say they plan to add product videos to their ecom-

merce sites in 2013, according to findings from Multichannel Merchant's MCM Outlook 2013 report on ecommerce. Video is a popular value-add that can help better explain products to potential buyers and give them the confidence needed to buy.

Social Search

Online shopping is no longer confined the traditional ecommerce site—it encompasses mobile and social shopping. But retailers are now learning that they can generate additional customer engagement and product promotion through social media sites like Facebook, using social search.

Steiner Tractor Supply, a 38-year-old merchant that sells antique trailer parts

in the B2B and B2C market, is just one of many retailers that open its search capabilities to the social media arena.

Besides having an active and customizable site search on their ecommerce site, Steiner Tractor Supply has a product search tab on its Facebook page, and that allows fans to search for products by brand, model or type. The results include product name, product number, price and a large photo.

Facebook search results are also customizable, just like traditional ecommerce search pages, and can include sorted results by bestsellers, price, oldest to newest, or newest to oldest—which is also a tactic every retailer needs to have on their traditional ecommerce search results page.

But social search is not just about using social media to promote your products. Shoppers trust the opinions of others and this is why ratings and reviews, submitted by your customers, matter. Ratings and reviews are searchable, and should be included on every product page not matter

Steiner Tractor Supply offers search suggestions that include specific tractor parts and popular search words in an effort to make searching the site user friendly.
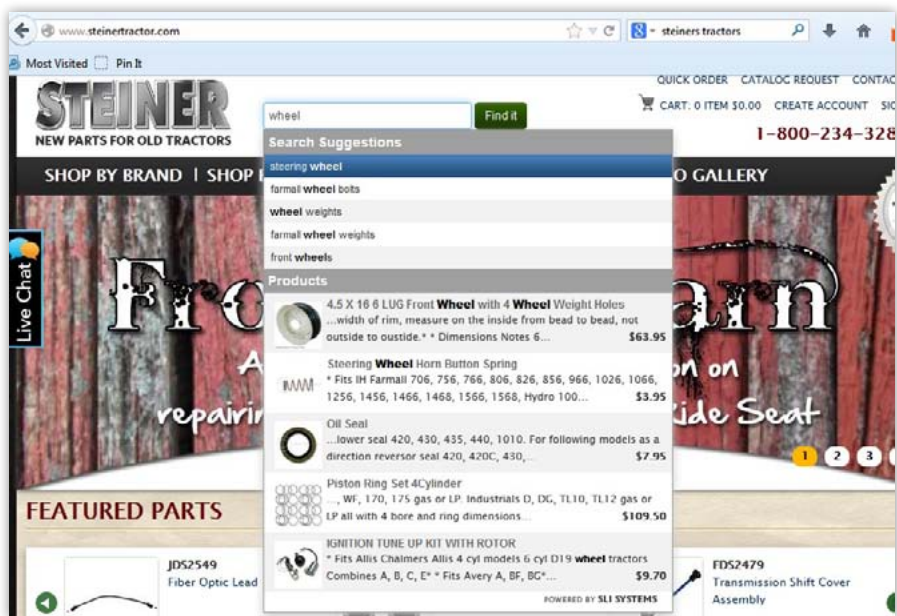
what your customers are saying.

The power of public opinion is key when it comes to selling, and retailers are taking notice. According to MCM Outlook 2013, 26.5% of respondents said they planned to add customer ratings and reviews to their sites this year.

A perfect example of the importance of ratings or reviews would be a recent study conducted by HubSpot which found that 71% of people are more likely to make a purchase based on friends' social media suggestions and 70% trusted consumer reviews.

The Mobile Site Search

According to a recent EpiServer survey, 38% of consumers said they would abandon a mobile site if it was difficult to use. Bottom line: Your company can't revel in the financial glory if your responsive design is failing.

Consumers are communicating and shopping with brands like never before and because of this the search options need to be relevant and useable on all devices including smartphones and tablets.

However, don't mirror your ecommerce site when designing for mobile search. The two experiences are completely separate in the eyes of the user.

Unlike a desktop searcher, a mobile searcher generally doesn't have the time to dig through product pages to find what he or she wants. Mobile shoppers want instant gratification, which is why it is imperative to present mobile consumers with fast, relevant results.

When looking at a mobile results page, it's important to put the most popular items first. These can be found by looking through your site's keyword data and analytics regularly.

As with the desktop version of your site, the location of the search bar is imperative when it comes to mobile. Smartphones and tablet devices limit the complete visibility of your site— users cannot easily scroll up and down, or see a full landing page on one screen. The search bar location in mobile should be large and located at the top and the bottom of the page for easy access by the user.

Every mobile site's search bar should also include auto complete. Not only will it reduce the number of clicks and keystrokes visitors need to make, but can save your visitor's sanity by reducing the number of spelling or clicking errors.

Coffee retailer Keurig, for example, uses auto complete to show the most popular search terms just below the search box. The search suggestions on Keurig's site are also spaced out to help avoid fat finger syndrome and avoid hitting the wrong selection.

Dodge this nuisance by making buttons big enough to click on and enough space between links to avoid triggering some other action.

Pay Attention to Search Queries

It has been said several times in this report that retailers need to pay attention to the popular keywords that searchers are typing when they get to an ecommerce site. The data that you can obtain through looking at your search metrics is a goldmine of information. It not only can provide the shopper with the products they are in search of but also provide you, the retailer, with data about how people are searching your site. This type of information if used properly, can improve the overall user experience and boost your paid search and SEO plans.

If you have tested and analyzed your queries from visitor searches, you probably have a good understanding of what perspective buyers are looking for. But, if you are not keeping track of what visitors are looking for, you better start doing so on a weekly basis.

While none of these tips will magically fix your site, they will help you understand what works and what doesn't and most importantly can help create a much more buyer friendly environment.
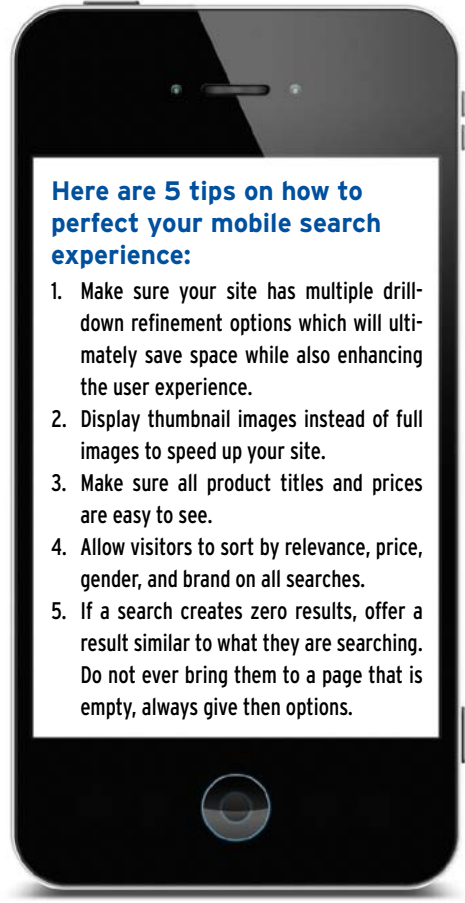
Here are 5 tips on how to perfect your mobile search experience:

1. Make sure your site has multiple drill-down refinement options which will ultimately save space while also enhancing the user experience.
2. Display thumbnail images instead of full images to speed up your site.
3. Make sure all product titles and prices are easy to see.
4. Allow visitors to sort by relevance, price, gender, and brand on all searches.
5. If a search creates zero results, offer a result similar to what they are searching. Do not ever bring them to a page that is empty, always give then options.

The following Multichannel Merchant articles are cited in this report:

- *MCM Outlook 2013*
- *5 Ways to Boost Navigation and Search Conversions*
- *How Effective Site Search Can Boost Sales*
- *Making Your Site Search Results Stand Out*
- *How to React to 5 Changing Online Customer Behaviors*
- *Use Site Search to Improve the Mobile Experience*
- *Survey Says Merchants are Boosting Site Search Efforts*
- *How to Optimize Search for Mobile Customers*
- *How Retailers Can Leverage Advanced Site Search*
- *More Merchants Making Ecommerce Video a Must*
- *Product Videos Can Increase Visibility and Customer Engagement*