



Ecommerce Site Search

A Guide to Evaluating Site Search Solutions

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Introduction

Site search has become more than just a product locator, and changes in online shopping behavior are continually driving shifts in site search strategies. Consumers expect personalized and highly relevant search results along with the ability to refine the product selection based on item attributes, such as price or brand.

Industry leaders surveyed in The Aberdeen Group's **Analyst Insight for Search Innovation** found that “rapidly shifting customer affinities” are compelling companies to improve site search functionality. The study refers to “changing customer affinities” as a shift in customer preferences in how they use site search and what they expect in website navigation.

Ecommerce Industry Leaders, as identified by the Aberdeen Group, cite three primary strategies for success:

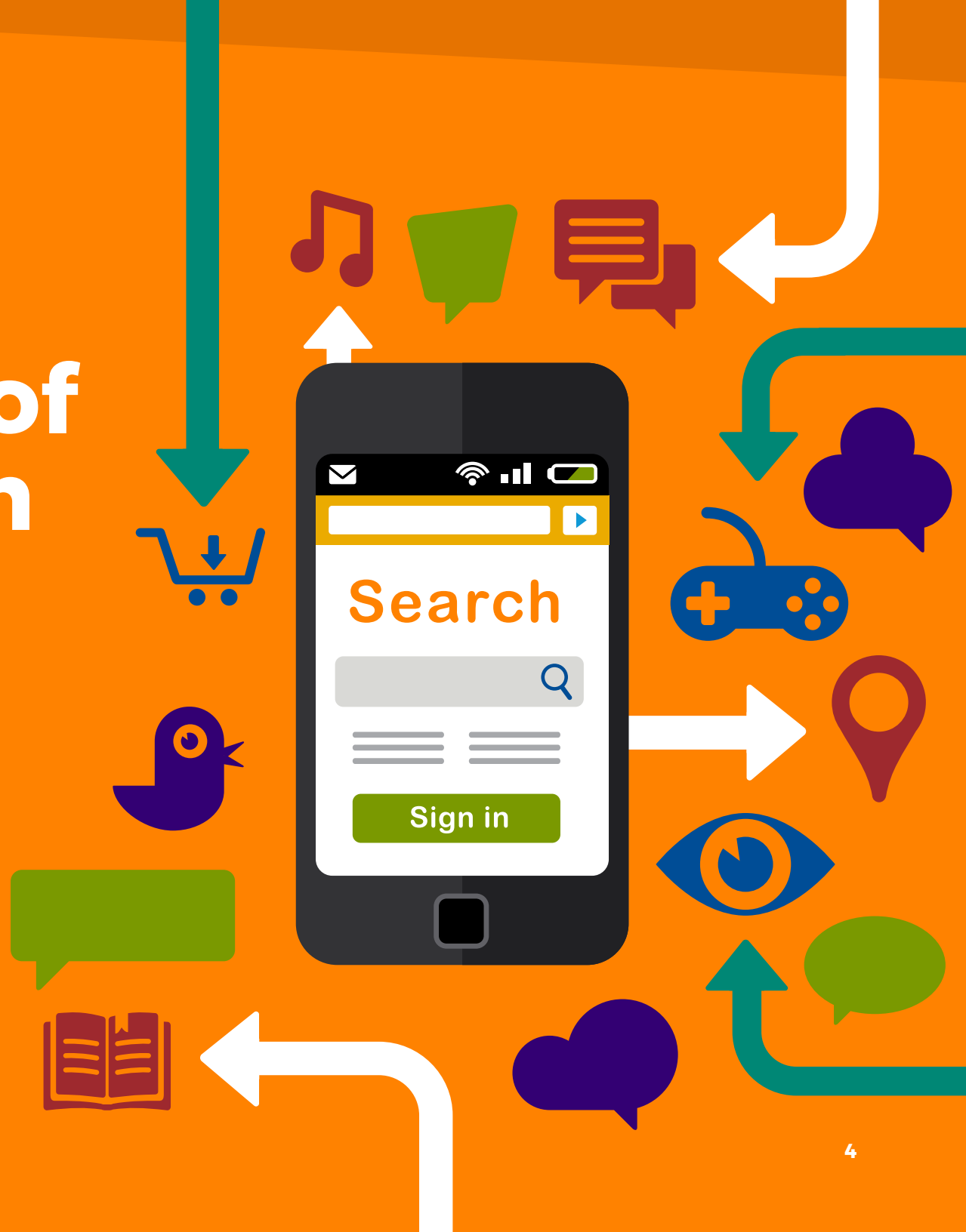
- **Personalized search results**
- **Increased search result variability**
- **Product strategy based on deeper customer segmentation**

Companies like Amazon are setting the standard for online retailers. They excel at leveraging customer information in a way that benefits both the shopper and the seller, creating an expectation for personalized shopping across the web.

Although many ecommerce platforms come with a built in site search feature, they may not be delivering the experience your visitors expect. First, let's take a look at the value of site search.



The Value of Site Search



CHAPTER 1: The Value of Site Search

MEETING CUSTOMER DEMANDS

When visitors come to your website, they want it to be easy to find products. Eighty percent of shoppers will abandon a site with poor search functionality.

Consumers are now well aware that online retailers have access to their purchase behavior as well as their shopping preferences. A personalized shopping experience has become an expectation instead of an intrusion. There is also an increasing demand among online shoppers to control the shopping experience.

These changes in consumer behavior have made site search a key customer touch point, especially with consumer expectations being higher than ever. Research suggests that online shoppers are becoming impatient with endless navigation options, and search is becoming the preferred method of interacting with a website.

However, most websites fail to meet consumer expectations. Searches return less than relevant results, the “no results found” page is still prevalent, and many sites lack effective attribute driven navigation.

Independent studies have shown that enterprise site search can help businesses:

- **Increase conversion rates**
by dynamically customizing search results based on visitor behavior and traffic sources, such as an email or AdWords campaign.
- **Increase ecommerce revenue**
by increasing conversions and average order value.
- **Increase visitor engagement**
by delivering more relevant results.
- **Reduce website abandonment**
by providing an excellent customer experience.
- **Increase product “findability”**
by exposing products previously not available through navigation alone.
- **Increase cross-sell and up-sell opportunities.**

An integrated approach to merchandising and content management will have a positive impact on things such as: average order value, conversion rates, and customer loyalty and satisfaction.

30%

**REPORTED INCREASE IN THE
NUMBER OF VISITORS USING
THE SITE SEARCH FEATURES**

45%

**INCREASE IN CONVERSION,
AS EXPERIENCED BY LEADING
ONLINE RETAILERS**

22%

**RISE IN AVERAGE
ORDER VALUE**

The success of **Goedeker's**, one of America's largest independent retailers of discount appliances, home furniture and mattresses, demonstrates this point.

After implementing an enterprise site search solution, they reported a nearly 30% increase in the number of visitors using the site search features. These visitors are converting at rates of up to 25% higher than the same period last year.

Other leading online retailers have experienced results such as a 45% increase in conversion, a 22% rise in average order value, and a significant increase in revenue over the previous year.

CHAPTER 1: The Value of Site Search

Improving the Online Experience

Every time a visitor enters a search term, they are providing you with important information about their intent. The data captured in site search reports not only provides valuable insights into what's important to your visitors, it's also a great way to uncover opportunities for improvement.

- **Merchandising:** Search reports enable you to keep track of the top searches and can be used as a guide to improve your merchandising by featuring products from the most popular searches.
- **New Product Ideas:** Search terms with high volume and few or no results can be great idea starters for product development ideas.
- **Enhanced Navigation:** Adjust navigation based on consumer behavior such as which product attributes are clicked on most often and the number of pages viewed.
- **Search Engine Optimization:** Keywords used to find products through your internal search engine can add value to your SEO efforts. The data provides insights as to how users and, by extension, search engines interpret your site.

As ecommerce continues to grow and the demands of shoppers increase, the value of site search is higher than ever before. Evaluating the search and navigation experience is a critical step in understanding whether or not existing functionality is meeting your visitors' expectations.

It's always a good idea to evaluate existing functionality through an objective lens, so you can identify opportunities to improve the customer experience.



CHAPTER 2:

How Do You Know if Your Site Search is Delivering?



CHAPTER 2: How Do You Know if Your Site is Delivering?

A recent study by Baymard Institute revealed some ugly facts about how consumers really feel about the site search features on most websites. They benchmarked the experience of the 50 top-grossing US ecommerce websites and found that there are some notable deficiencies in functionality. Here's a summary of a few of the more interesting statistics:

Our research clearly supports these findings and based on our customer's experience we've found that:

30%

Site search accounts for over 30% of the activity on a website

40%

Site search is a part of the shopping experience in over 40% of online purchases

6x's more likely

Visitors who utilize the auto-complete search feature with thumbnails are six times more likely to convert from a visitor into a buyer.

80%

80% of visitors will abandon a site as a result of a poor site search experience

95%

95% of searchers never go past the first page of results

Site Search Engine Implementation Gaps

- **16%** of ecommerce website search engines are not capable of returning results based on the item name or SKU, even when the information is available on the website.
- **70%** do not make use of synonyms and require shoppers to search using the exact description of the product. This practice has the potential to frustrate visitors by returning no results for "flatware" if they search on "silverware." There is also an increased risk of displaying less than complete results when products are described in more than one way in the database, which means you could be losing sales.
- The good news is that **82%** of websites have an auto complete suggestion function. The bad news is that according to the study **36%** of the implementations are done poorly and actually harm the customer experience.
- Faceted search was found on only **40%** of the websites, inspite of the fact that it's been proven to be one of the fundamental cornerstones of a good navigation experience.¹

These statistics make it clear that it's important to have a search feature that delivers relevant results. So how do you know if your search is delivering?

The following are some of the key triggers that may indicate it's time to make a change:

Consistent customer complaints about the website experience

Check in with your customer care representatives and find out what customers are saying about your website. Have them track the number of calls that are related to product findability. Better yet, also sit down with one of them for an afternoon and listen in on some calls. If there are frequent calls because people can't find the products they see in the catalog, it's a strong indicator that your site search isn't working.

¹Baymard Institute, "The Current State of E-commerce Search," 2014

CHAPTER 2: How Do You Know if Your Site is Delivering?

Feedback companies such as **Foresee** are also an excellent way to gather insights about site search. These tools allow you to set up very specific questions within navigation paths. You can gain insight about what's working and also identify opportunities to improve the user experience.

Products are hard to find

First use your search analytics data to review the most popular search terms. Hopefully the number of results returned matches the number of products you have in that category. If not, you will want to figure out why and make appropriate adjustments such as updating the thesaurus. Also examine the search terms with medium to high frequency and few results. This will also help uncover opportunities to update product naming conventions and make category adjustments.

Don't stop with the data. Also conduct some internal tests to see if all of your products are getting the visibility you want them to. You might be surprised what happens when you search on your own website. Here are some questions that can help you evaluate the experience from a qualitative perspective.

- Do some of your search terms generate pages and pages of results that are hard to navigate?
- Are the right products being featured?
- Can you filter search results by product attributes such as size, color, or price?
- Is there a feature to sort results by most popular, average customer review, or new?
- Does your Smart Autocomplete suggest relevant matches?

Navigation isn't consistent throughout the website

Consumers expect and prefer consistency in navigation. If you provide the ability to filter search results, you should also offer the same feature in category browsing. The same goes for sorting, page navigation and branding.

High exit rate from site search

Review the exit rate for the various pages on your site to see where shoppers are when they abandon the visit. A higher than average exit rate from site search pages, especially if the sessions have only one or two pages per visit, it is a strong indicator that visitors do not find the results relevant.

Lower than average conversion rates and average order value

In addition to reviewing the exit rate, take a close look at conversion rates. If they are significantly lower than from the rest of your site, it could be because people aren't able to easily find products. Shoppers who use site search often-times purchase more than those who browse because the search experience is designed to reveal products they might not be aware of.

Merchandisers have no control over the experience

If your merchandising team has little or no ability to customize the search experience or make changes based on things such as product availability, visitor demographics, and shopping behavior, then you're missing sales.

One size fits all results

Consumers have become accustomed to personalized and variable results based on their search history, interaction with the website, and location to name a few. Returning the same search results to all visitors is no longer sufficient.

With that in mind, it may be time to replace it or look into the possibility of upgrading your solution to improve the customer experience and increase sales. Site search is no longer just for finding products. The features discussed in the next chapter are key to delivering value to your customers and prospects.

CHAPTER 3:

10 Must Have Site Search Features

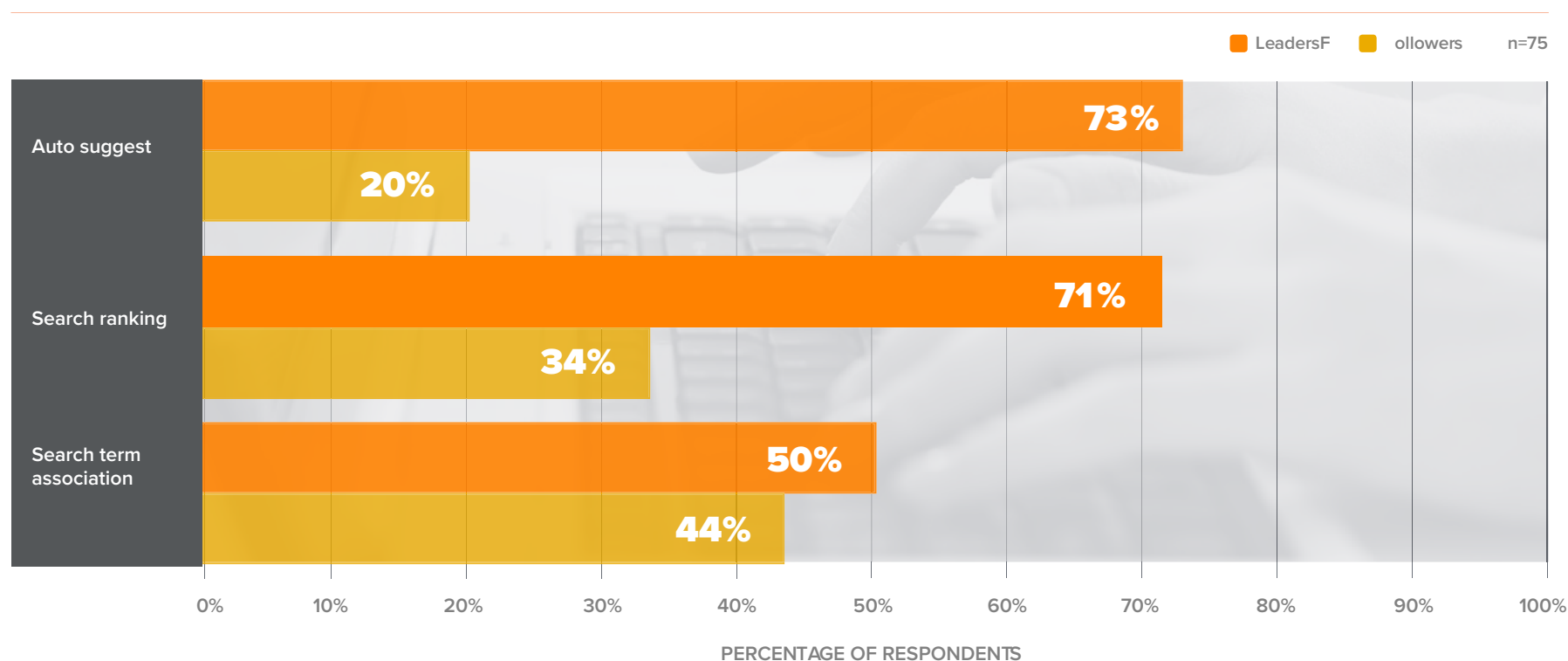


CHAPTER 3: 10 Must Have Site Search Features

Changes in consumer behavior are driving the need to update search strategies. We're also seeing an increased demand for advanced features; the Aberdeen Group's insights report found auto suggest, search ranking, and search term association as the top three supporting search capabilities.

Figure 3:

Supporting Search Capabilities



Source: Aberdeen Group, September 2012

10 Must Have Site Search Features:



1

Smart Autocomplete

This feature enables “search as you type” processes for the visitor. The site search engine gives recommendations based on popular searches and real time behavior. It ensures that search results are automatically aligned with the most popular results. The best experience includes the use of a thumbnail. Visitors who utilize the auto-complete search feature with thumbnails are **six times more likely to convert** from a visitor into a buyer.

2

Search Ranking

A facility for establishing relevance rankings and overrides will increase the relevancy of the search results and can increase revenue and margins. Leading online retailers create relevancy rules within categories, pricing tiers, and brands. They also use it to promote the most profitable products and demote products that have low stock levels.

3

Search Term Association

This functionality uses site search data to promote related products and services. Data driven cross sell strategies are used to make suggestions based on the initial search and product views. It requires robust analytics and supporting merchandising tools.

4

Business Friendly Merchandising Tools

This toolset will enable your merchandising team to promote products and merchandise in both search and category results. Merchandising decisions can and should be made in real time to adjust for changes in inventory levels and visitor behavior.

5

Faceted or Attribute Driven Navigation

Attribute driven navigation enables shoppers to search and browse for products with multiple attributes in any order and be presented with relevant results. Price, color, brand, and model are examples of features that are important to consumers.

6

Integrated Navigation

Consistent navigation throughout the website improves the customer experience. It reduces the time needed for a visitor to learn how to navigate your site and makes it easier to find products based on the shoppers intent.

7

Product Comparison

A side-by-side product comparison feature allows a consumer to compare multiple products on a website with ease and makes a website “webroom ready.” “Webrooming” describes a change in consumer behavior. Websites have been transformed into virtual showrooms. The percentage of shoppers who research and compare products online before making an in-store purchase is at an all-time high and will continue to grow.

8

Mobile/Tablet Experience

Seamless integration with your online catalog and support for responsive interfaces are key components of an omni-channel site search solution. Shoppers will determine which version of your site they want to use. Often-times they will use a mobile device such as a smart phone or tablet during the research phase and then make the actual purchase from the desktop version. Making the experience friendly and consistent across desktops, tablets, and mobile devices will keep shoppers on your site instead of your competitors.

9

Dynamic Landing Pages

Enabling merchandisers with a tool to create dynamic landing pages allows them to create and manage a more relevant customer experience, adjust branding, promotions, and product result sets based on the searcher’s source and search terms. The more closely the content of a landing page matches the marketing message, the more highly it will convert.

10

Reporting and Analysis Tools

Robust analytics provide insight into consumer behavior and contain data that will help you adjust and improve the search experience. Actionable data such as top searches, top facets, pagination activity, conversion tracking, and top keywords by clicks are among the important metrics you should be tracking.

There are search solutions that provide advanced features, such as the ability to merchandise through banner campaigns or product rankings. The best search solutions provide tools that enable your merchandising team to customize the shopping experience based on browsing patterns, conduct A/B tests, and include learning search capabilities that update and personalize results.

CHAPTER 4:

Tips for a Successful Selection Process



CHAPTER 4: Tips for a Successful Selection Process

E-commerce search functionality can be difficult to evaluate because many solutions (including those that are part of a platform) look the same on the surface.

Site search features and underlying technology have the potential to change more frequently than other ecommerce functions. You want to be sure that you're partnering with a company that has a history of making product enhancements and employs a knowledgeable team of subject matter experts.

5 Must Ask Questions when Selecting a Site Search Solution.

1. Does the site search partner have a history of continuous improvement?
2. What are the future plans for the product?
3. Are there any unusual implementation requirements?
4. How difficult is it to create custom rules and dynamic landing pages?
5. How seamless is the integration across channels?

Include these questions/criteria as a part of your RFP (request for proposal). Ask for detailed lists of past and planned feature enhancements, product development, and technology improvements. Site search is a progressive technology, and it's important to work with a team that is constantly innovating and investing in research and development.

Request details about each of the important features, particularly if it's one that you want to implement site-wide. You want to make sure you don't have to implement functionality such as guided navigation on a subdomain. A detailed overview of each integration point and the level of effort associated with the implementation are important parts of the evaluation process. Gaining an understanding of the implementation requirements up front will help avoid unpleasant surprises during the project.

Request a hands-on demo of the interface and processes instead of getting a glossy brochure or a plethora of screen shots. Sometimes features are not as easy to use as they appear in the sales demonstration.

The heart of the online experience is site search. Selecting the right solution that enables you to easily and effectively manage the customer experience is critical. Don't settle for part of the story, and don't be afraid to dig in and ask the tough questions that will help you determine the best fit for your business.

It can be easy to be fooled by demos that are filled with bells and whistles, so be sure to pull the curtain back and confirm that what you see in the demo is as easy to implement as it seems on the surface. It's not uncommon for gaps between functionality and business requirements to be discovered long after the project has started, sometimes even after the implementation.

The number one reason software projects fail is due to poorly defined requirements and a selection process that doesn't uncover those gaps.

CHAPTER 4: Tips for a Successful Selection Process

7 Steps to finding the Right Site Search Solution:

While there isn't a "one size fits all" process for evaluating and selecting the right solution, it's still important to incorporate structure around the decision. Here are steps to consider, keeping in mind the size of your business and the estimated cost of the project. Larger companies looking at a higher monthly fee and professional services dollars should consider the following as a more formal process to ensure success.

There are companies who offer free trials and setups depending on the size of the business and the number of SKU's in the online catalog, so be sure to ask.

Steps 1, 2, and 7 apply in any scenario.

Steps 3 to 6 are optional based on the size of the company and the anticipated spend. If you anticipate making a big investment, these steps can help reduce risk and ensure success.

1. **Define your requirements.** Create a document that contains each of your requirements and specific examples of what you expect. Document your requirements **before** you invite any vendors in for demos. The level of formality will vary based on company culture and internal processes, but it's a step that should be considered as part of the process.
2. **Set up product demonstrations.** Use this as an opportunity to further flesh out your requirements and update them with any features that you discovered during the demo. An initial demo is a good time to get an overall feel for whether or not the product has the potential to be a good fit. It also gives you time to evaluate the relationship aspect of an engagement as well.
3. **Document your requirements in the form of an RFP (Request for Proposal).** This makes sure that all vendors are being held accountable to the same thing and it helps take the "emotion" out of the decision. It also ensures that important features don't slip through the cracks. Include important details about your business, target audience, and technical environment.
4. **Send the RFP to your top 3-5 vendors.** Provide them with a timeline and an opportunity to ask questions. It's ideal if you provide a template for the responses and ask each participant to provide the responses using your format. This enables you to evaluate the responses more easily.
5. **Collect and evaluate the responses.** Include a qualitative evaluation in addition to the answers to the questions. Do they seem to understand your business niche? Did they respond in a timely manner? Did they provide a custom reply or a cookie cutter response?
6. **Narrow the list to the top 2 (maybe 3).** Bring them in for a detailed demonstration. The demonstration should include specific scenarios that are representative of how your customers search and navigate your website. Evaluate the "out of the box" results and if there is a gap, have the vendor show you how it would be addressed.
7. **Evaluate the fit and make your selection.** Remember, there's nothing more important to your website than a good site search solution, and evaluating and selecting the right partner and technology is key to your success.

Conclusion



Conclusion

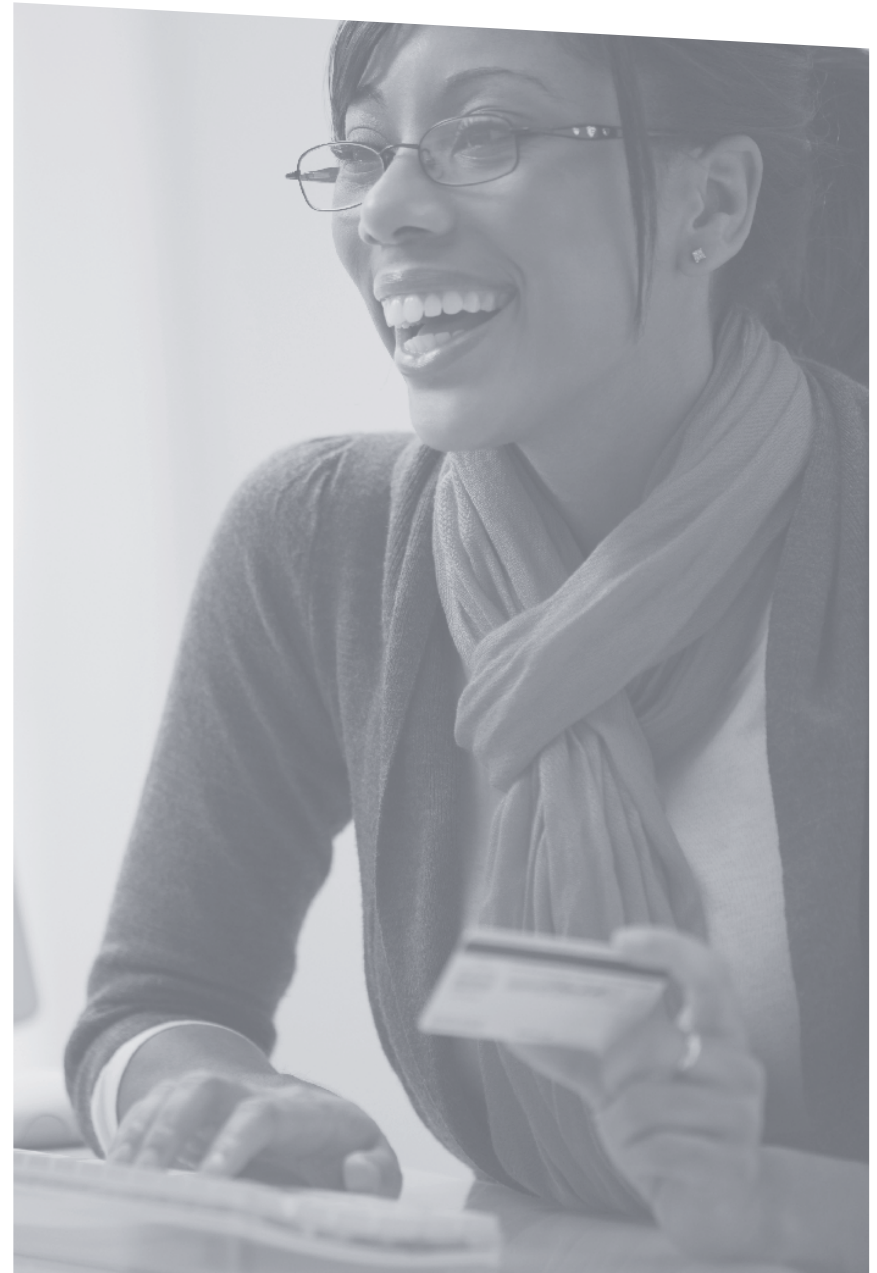
The future is omni-channel, and site search is a key customer touch point. An integrated approach to merchandising and content management will have a positive impact on things such as: average order value, conversion rates, and customer loyalty and satisfaction.

As the ecommerce market continues to grow and shoppers turn to websites for product research, the value of site search will continue to grow in importance. Shoppers expect a seamless and personalized experience across all channels and devices.

It's important to evaluate the functionality of your site search and determine whether or not it's meeting the needs of your customers, including:

- **Personalized search results**—search results based on personal search history
- **Increased shopper control**—the ability to filter and sort search results based on preferences
- **Data driven merchandising**—using consumer behavior and shopping preferences to increase relevancy
- **Cross channel and device consistency**—delivering a consistent customer experience across all channels and devices such as desktops, tablets, and smartphones.

Replacing your existing site search is an investment in the future of your business. The out-of-pocket cost may be more in the beginning; however the increase in site search conversions makes it well worth the investment. Also, many solutions are offered as a hosted solution which can help contain the costs.



BONUS

Pros and Cons of “Out-of-the-Box” Ecommerce Search Functionality



Bonus: Pros and Cons of “Out-of-the-Box” Ecommerce Search Functionality

Ecommerce platforms are getting more and more sophisticated and come with almost every feature and function imaginable, including ecommerce search functionality.

It seems like the logical and most cost effective thing to do would be to select and implement a platform that “does it all,” rather than integrating multiple software solutions together to build your online store front.

Out-of-the-Box Ecommerce Search Functionality

PROS:

- **One platform to manage and master**—a single user interface for business users and IT.
- **Single vendor relationship**—one point of contact for sales, support, and ongoing maintenance.
- **Lower out-of-pocket cost**—the initial cost of purchasing and implementing one solution will be less than the cost of two.

CONS:

- **Generic Features**—because ecommerce platforms are implemented in many industries, built-in site search features are “one size fits all” and usually can’t be modified to the specific needs of an industry.
- **Limited functionality**—by nature, platforms that are “all-inclusive” are also more generalized in the features and functions they offer. The development resources tend to be subject matter experts in overall web architecture and the shopping cart but not site search.
- **Increased risk of becoming outdated**—Google moves fast and consumer’s expectations for how “search” works change just as quickly. R & D efforts for a site search provider are focused on improving the relevancy of search results and incorporating the latest trends. The R & D roadmap for an ecommerce platform is split across many areas of functionality, and it’s unlikely that site search will get much attention.
- **Lower site search conversions**—in many cases there’s a limited ability to fine tune and customize search results so that they are more relevant to visitors. The ability to constantly fine tune and improve search results increases site search conversions and average order value.

About Hawksearch

Hawksearch is an intelligent search and recommendations platform that powers success for any size organization across all industries. Our goal is to ensure brands have innovative tools to deliver accurate, relevant and customizable search experiences enabling users to find the relevant results for their needs in context, no matter the device, platform, or language. Having completed over 400+ implementations, Hawksearch is utilized for delivering engaging and personalized search experiences through our innovative features, which enable marketers, merchandisers and developers to accomplish their goals.

To learn more, visit www.hawksearch.com or email info@hawksearch.com

1-888-7-SEARCH

