



How Can I Help You, Human?

UNLOCKING THE MARKETING POTENTIAL OF GUIDED SITE SEARCH



Abstract

Site search has traditionally been ignored by marketers and relegated to IT departments. Typically using the most basic option available, the search bar is both ubiquitous on websites, as well as often ignored by everyone except one important constituency- the website visitor. However, recent advances in behavioral analytics and the rise of artificial intelligence has been revolutionary for onsite search software, enabling marketers to create more compelling customer experiences. To support

customer engagement with specific pieces of content that are relevant to them, a new category of “guided” site search engines is emerging, offering a myriad of improvements such as intuitive relevance adjustments, behavioral analytics, and predictive features that provide results that users did not even know they needed. Guided search is quickly becoming a new medium of digital conversation.



Site Search: The Misunderstood Marketing Tool

Site search is one of the most important ways to communicate with and understand the behaviors of website visitors. On average, 1 in 3 visitors to a website will use the search function to find specific content they are looking for- these visitors are more likely to convert versus a user who browses using standard site navigation. This is because site search users tend to be “objective focused” – they are looking for something specific and are telling you in their own language what they want. This is borne out by the conversion metrics from site search- in a recent study of ecommerce sites², visitors that used search converted at 4.63% versus the websites’

average of 2.77% - that’s 1.8 times more effective. Consequently, these visitors went on to contribute 13.8% of the revenues to these sites.

However, due to a legacy of underinvestment and underutilization, site search has been conventionally considered an IT tool more than a marketing solution. The result is that the visitor will usually find a varied mix of non-specific content based literally on the keyword they entered, and in some cases, nothing at all. This is analogous to a young child being sent to fetch a pair of shoes from your closet- a typical basic website search solution will



visitors that used search converted at 4.63%
versus the websites’ average of 2.77%

1. Charleton, Graham (2013) Ecommerce Best Practice Compendium. eConsultancy U.K.

2. Charleton, Graham (2013) Is site search less important for niche retailers? eConsultancy U.K.

bring back any random style of shoe with little consideration of the context behind the request, such as the time of day, or the specific event you are going to. In these scenarios, visitors searching for information on a specific item or program for example, will receive content results on everything tangentially related to that keyword in no particular order, including old press releases from years ago, and other bits of irrelevant content. This represents more than a simple waste of time and effort for the user- it represents a wealth of missed opportunity for the marketer.

Given the increasing focus on content marketing across all industries, and the consequent rapid rise in spending on content creation, marketers are missing a golden opportunity to deliver highly relevant and compelling content directly to their target audiences. It's a home-field advantage that cannot be overstated, yet is chronically underserved by "passive" search tools that lack the intelligence being woven into every other aspect of the digital customer journey.



The Elephant in The Room

One of the main reasons more focus has not been placed on the development of better on-site search technology has been the elephant in the room- Google. As an industry leader that controls over 60% of the national market share, and a brand name that is almost synonymous with the act of internet search itself, it has traditionally been a daunting task to compete with Google's site search offerings. Their Google Site Search (GSS) product has largely been the go-to option when looking for a site search utility. Inexpensive and easily available, to date it has been the most utilized tool in the market. However, while GSS has the Google pedigree behind it, it has always been a relatively mediocre tool from a marketing perspective. With no manual control over the ranking of results, and the relative lack of access to actual human tech support, Google Site Search worked well enough for basic sites, but stopped short of being the type of flexible and powerful solution that greatly enhanced the website user experience or empowered marketing teams.


In an extraordinarily compelling event, Google announced the discontinuation of Google Site Search, with all its strengths and shortcomings, by April 2018. In its place, the search giant is offering the new Google Custom Search. However, the new Google search solution, much to the chagrin of many faithful GSS customers, promises a marked

decrease in the control and personalization people had over their site with GSS. Custom Search contains a host of unsatisfactory features, such as the visual disconnect of the search display from the rest of the site, and a lack of control over the customization of results. Most important however, is the fact that the new Google solution is 100% ad supported. In the latest version, ads from across the internet appear in your search results, some of which might be from competitors. This is not the first time Google has discontinued a popular search product; right before the demise of Google Site Search, support also was ended for their enterprise search product, Google Search Appliance.

The end of these Google search products has suddenly left a vast number of organizations worldwide scrambling to find an effective replacement to continue with. However, from an evolutionary perspective this is a blessing in disguise. With most of Google's popular on-site search products retired, the gap is being filled with intuitive new search solutions from providers that offer more features based on customer preferences, data analytics and the ease of implementation. At the end of an era for Google on-site search, we find ourselves at the dawn of a new era of intelligent, user-centric search solutions.

The Rise of “Guided” Search

Recent advances in behavioral analytics and front-end software development have created an increased interest in using these capabilities to create more compelling customer experiences. These experiences are largely driven by an increased marketing focus on content. To support customer engagement with specific pieces of content that are relevant to them, a nascent category of “guided” on-site search engines is emerging. Guided search provides both users and marketers with visible options for clarifying and refining queries. It enables users to filter their searches based on different attributes to get more focused results. Beyond the traditional search and browse function and a list of results, guided search serves up results in an intelligently categorized layout that leads the user down an easy path to the information they are looking for. This type of solution also enables the marketer to pre-define aspects of the user path, guides their decisions via behavioral analytics, and allows them to manually rank and modify the results being served on their sites. It allows both the marketer and the user to formulate sophisticated queries by taking a series of easy steps.³



guided search
serves up results
in an intelligently
categorized layout
that leads the
user down an
easy path to the
information they
are looking for

3. Doyle, C. (2016). A dictionary of marketing. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Guided search engines analyze a website's metadata based on the search term and excludes pages that do not meet the criteria for the query. The resulting information is summarized into multiple filters that encompasses every aspect of the content, and is especially useful at providing context and structure to large volumes of content. It then runs the results against the results of past searches before serving them to the user, organizing the information to deliver the most relevant results based on past user interactions. Guided search is therefore considered more of a discovery tool than a mere search tool, as it covers different dimensions of your site's content, allowing users to understand what is available on your site and revealing content they may not have been conscious of. It narrows down results into different dimensions which allows users to easily review and select what is relevant to them. Various suggestions appear to reveal all the possible options available that are tied to that query, sometimes with visual cues

included, to create a more interactive path for exploration.⁴

The use of a guided search offers a solution to marketers who are constantly dealing with irrelevant search results. It improves the search experience, helping users drill down from general results to specific ones; marketers and content managers can then take this information and build a pathway within the search that can essentially guide the user down the track they want them to be on.

With guided search, marketers can also learn how particular bits of content relate to others by following them down the search funnel. This knowledge can be used to leverage lesser known content within the site by tying it to more popular search terms. This also enables marketers to exert a significant amount of influence on the user journey within their search, by using various tools to refine results, tag, and tie pages to search terms.

4. Whitenton, K. (2014). Filters vs. Facets: Definitions. Nielsen Norman Group. <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/filters-vs-facets/>

Artificial Intelligence: The New Search Frontier

One of the key drivers behind truly relevant guided search is revolutions in artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, such as machine learning. This cognitive technology has given us the ability to create autonomous systems that can recognize links between search words and common queries, as well as learn and improve themselves based on the feedback of previous search results. Site search engines essentially become smarter with every new user interaction—they learn about user intent, queries, and concepts with greater speed, efficiency, and less human error.

The application of machine learning has been revolutionary for onsite search software; AI implementations offer a myriad of improvements such as intuitive relevance adjustments, behavioral analytics, and predictive features that provide results that users did not even know they needed.



Some of the effects of machine learning on site search are:

- Improved result ranking
- Greater relevance
- Clearer query understanding, with classification of intent
- Spelling error detection and suggestions
- Identification of relevant synonyms
- Clearer page/document classification
- In-depth understanding of user behavior and journey⁵

5. Dandekar, N. (2016). What are some uses of machine learning in search engines? <https://medium.com/@nikhilbd/what-are-some-uses-of-machine-learning-in-search-engines-5770f534d46b>

AI-DRIVEN SEARCH: A RICH MARKETING RESOURCE

The rich customer data delivered by machine learning engines is a powerful resource that marketers can tap into. AI driven search isn't just an autonomous system providing continuous enhancements within the user journey- it can also offer deep insights into user behavior. While search results will experience a drastic improvement in quality and relevance, along with greater personalization of the results based on individual queries, marketers can also utilize this technology to better understand their customers and manually tweak search engine settings to their advantage. AI-powered search provides marketers with predictive knowledge

that helps them make sense out of the masses of data from subsites, content, channels, and more—and apply it to identify user intent, trends in behavior, and successful content. Marketers can also take advantage of data mined from search analytics and user journeys to learn more about customer behavior and model marketing prospects against predicted customer needs.

In the long run, AI driven guided search can save marketing and IT teams hours trying to analyze and optimize their website content. Relevance is updated automatically and search results are kept at optimal quality, giving them more time to spend on other tasks such as content creation and refinement.



marketers can also utilize this technology to better understand their customers and manually tweak search engine settings to their advantage

Buying A Search Solution

While on-site search has traditionally been a responsibility held by the IT department, modern marketing and content teams should have more claim to the tool because they are the ones who understand their target users and can best determine what pages should ideally show up at the top of the search results. New CMS solutions have given marketers direct control over corporate websites and landing pages, allowing them to iterate upon and learn from their content mix. However search, a direct conduit to that content, has remained within the purview of IT departments. This has limited marketer's focus on this highly important and interactive customer interface. Essentially, marketers should take control of

the site search—monitoring and optimizing it for the best results possible.

The search solution you select for your website should have the perfect mix of intelligent autonomy and customizable features so that you have control over your search engine. When evaluating site search solution to find ones that offer you a guided experience and superior relevance, you should look for several key characteristics:

EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION

Contrary to popular belief, on-site search implementation and maintenance need not be a technical process executed only by developers. In its simplest form, site search with a script implementation is the easiest path to take. The script is just a simple snippet of JavaScript code that can be pasted within your site's code to setup search. All the technical work can potentially be handled by the search provider, so you won't have to fuss around with the development team every time something needs to be examined or updated. With the ease and flexibility of software-as-a-service (SaaS) solutions, the implementation of on-premise search solutions with the accompanying complications and expense of hardware installation, maintenance and support staff, is rapidly becoming a less attractive option.



POWERFUL RELEVANCE ENGINES

A good on-site search solution needs to be powerful enough to effectively rank pages according to the relevance for the user. Many basic on-site searches, such as those that are built into a CMS, are primitive systems that lack this functionality. Results are often ranked based on a wide variety of undefinable criteria, with disorganized results appearing from across the site, making the results less focused and relevant to the query. A good on-site search engine should have an advanced technology base, preferably one that is machine learning driven, that can automatically deliver results that are focused and highly relevant.


CUSTOMIZATION

Ideally, a search solution should make it easy to customize the visual presentation of search and results on your website. The search input bar and results page should not stand apart from the overall design of the website- it should be tightly integrated visually to create a seamless experience for the user. A well-built solution should offer the option of both inline or overlay search presentation, and allow you to customize the colors, fonts and other visual attributes of your search to match the website.

EASY TO USE TOOLS

With the aforementioned rise of SaaS search solutions, simpler solutions that have a more user-friendly interface are being built on-top of advanced search technology platforms to provide a solution that is not just powerful, but accessible to all. Search solutions should not be “black box” products- they should allow the

user to directly edit and configure their search results. Rather than relying on IT staff to tweak the search engine, newer SaaS search solutions enable marketers to directly monitor and adjust their solution in real time via an intuitive non-technical interface. Ongoing tasks like adjusting results rankings, removing old content that is no longer pertinent, adding uncommon keywords as synonyms to search terms, or creating separate engines for different areas of a website, are now easily accessible to site managers or marketers to go in and adjust manually.



newer SaaS
search solutions
enable marketers
to directly monitor
and adjust their
solution in real
time via an
intuitive non-
technical interface

These tools allow for the optimization of the search experience and can be used by marketers design a marketing strategy that incorporates search. A good onsite search solution should at least provide basic tools, such as page ranking, spell check, and synonyms. More advanced customization tools are desirable as they provide a higher-level of adjustment. These tools include facets, search boosting, banners, and more, allowing you to create a site search experience that guides users down a pathway of discovery and increases successful conversions.

ACTIONABLE ANALYTICS

Search should be regarded as more than just a customer facing tool- it's also an enabler that helps marketers make data driven decisions. Search buyers should look for powerful analytics and reporting dashboards that can save them time by guiding them to the most relevant behavioral data for visitors to their sites. A thoughtfully constructed search analytics platform should give you

the actionable insights you need to better understand your visitors, custom rank your search results, and continually refine the quality and relevance of your web content.

HUMAN SUPPORT

When Google reigned over the site search industry, an unfortunate flaw the company had was its lack of customer support. No matter how user-friendly a solution is, it is always reassuring to have the support of the technology provider to help with any implementation, maintenance or optimization issues. A good relationship between the provider and the customer is reciprocal – as providers help customers with questions and issue resolution, customers in turn can provide constructive feedback to help further improve their solution. Direct phone and email support are the gold standards in the search industry, and is often a crucial factor in ongoing customer satisfaction.



About Cludo

CLUDO IS A POWERFUL SEARCH & INSIGHTS ENGINE.

Cludo optimizes the way organizations and their customers connect with and use information. Our easy to use site search platform empowers you to easily customize and gain deep insights from your website's search functionality. Unlike passive search, our unique platform enables you to custom rank and prioritize search results, automatically creating an intelligent guided search experience for website visitors. Headquartered in Copenhagen, with offices in Minneapolis and London, Cludo's intelligent search & insights SaaS product is compatible with any website, and backed by an exceptional commitment to customer happiness.

For more information visit www.cludo.com

