

Boosting conversions through more relevant site search

Regardless of how many bells and whistles retailers incorporate into their web sites, site search remains the most effective marketing and merchandising tool because it is usually the first feature shoppers engage to locate the item they want.

Nevertheless, many retailers do not put the resources behind site search to ensure relevant results, especially for misspelled queries or to make appropriate cross-sell and upsell recommendations. Consequently, a significant number of shoppers do not find what they are looking for and end up going to a competitor's site.

"Producing relevant results—suggesting alternative search queries that guide shoppers to related items, and providing options for visitors to sort the results by lowest price, newest item, highest rating, etc.—is the biggest challenge retailers face with boosting conversion through site search," says Shaun Ryan, CEO of Cupertino, Calif.-based SLI Systems, provider of hosted site search services. "Many site search technologies still struggle to produce relevant results, especially when there are a lot of products to include in the results."

Removing the pain

Before choosing a site search engine, retailers must consider whether they want to run the application in-house or have the application hosted by a third party. Running an application in-house requires the purchase of software and hardware with enough capacity to handle the demands of site search. Next, retailers have to pay for installation and staff to build, test, run, and maintain the search index.

In contrast, a hosted application requires no hardware or software purchases and installation can be as simple as providing a data feed to the host system, then changing the search form to point to the search service the provider has built. The ease of installation and operation helps deliver a faster return on investment. "In our case, retailers can point their search box to our hosted service by changing as few as four lines of HTML code," Ryan says.

Hosted applications also enable retailers to review the search built by the service provider and make desired changes to it, include live pricing and inventory in results,

examine feeds of search results for quality assurance, and receive application upgrades.

"A hosted application takes away most of the pain normally associated with the deployment of site search and removes the need for clients to purchase and install any software, hardware or bandwidth, which speeds their ROI," Ryan says. "Maintenance and training costs are less and the hosted service has built-in redundancy to ensure uptime. Once all these costs are added up they can be prohibitive for a retailer to replicate."

To help clients gather metrics that can help them more accurately calculate their ROI, SLI has integrated third party analytics products, including Google Analytics and Omniture to its site search.

Providing options to guide shoppers in their search queries is essential as shoppers often do not know the best search terms to use. Suggesting alternative search terms successfully used by previous shoppers for similar items allows retailers to further leverage their search data for marketing. About 25% of shoppers who conduct a site search will click on a related search to refine their query.

More effective strategies

"The data retailers collect from site search, such as the terms people use and the items they click on, can help them develop more effective site search marketing strategies, because shoppers often don't know the best search terms to use," Ryan says. "Refinement options allow visitors to narrow results down to the areas they are interested in, such as sizing or color."

More advanced features include automatic creation of pages optimized for the most commonly used search terms and the ability to integrate product reviews with search results.

Still, retailers need to be properly trained to get the most out of their site search. "Training is non technical, but important because it gives retailers the ability to interpret actionable reports and make incremental improvements to their site search engine," Ryan says. "An application provider should have processes in place for continual product improvement and should work closely with clients to improve their site search." ■

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