Footwearetc.com Walks Your Way
Constant Improvement in Marketing and Customer Experience Yield Big Gains

By Susan E. Aldrich
Sr. VP and Sr. Consultant, Patricia Seybold Group
NETTING IT OUT

In the past three years, Footwearetc.com has modernized its ecommerce infrastructure to dazzling results. The site’s revenues have grown larger than the eight brick and mortar stores combined. By our evaluation, Footwearetc.com’s home page is a masterpiece of branding and overcoming shopper resistance. The site also has the best shopping cart experience we’ve seen. Personalizing email marketing, by integrating Exact Target with SLI Systems Learning Search, has doubled the email revenues. Since SLI Systems’ Site Champion began automating SEO in 2006, the site has received as many as 100,000 referrals per quarter. Additional traffic is on the way: Footwear etc. is one of the first companies to deploy Review Champion, a service from PowerReviews and SLI Systems, which makes customer reviews searchable from Google. Footwearetc.com’s success comes from unceasing improvement, creatively applying the tools at hand to smooth the frictions that slow the flow of revenue.

INTRODUCING FOOTWEARETC.COM

Walk Your World in Our Shoes

Footwear etc.’s customers like shoes that feel good on their feet: Their shoes are for walking, not just for admiring. They have strong preferences for a few brands, brands they know from experience will fit comfortably. Footwear etc.’s tag line is, “Walk your world in our shoes.”

Mike Baranov, Footwear etc.’s Director of Online Operations, designs his merchandising and marketing to help his customers connect with the shoes they feel good about, and good in. Store customers come to Footwearetc.com to reorder their favorites, and sometimes to make a purchase after trying on shoes in a store.

Footwear etc. is a multichannel retailer headquartered in Sunnyvale with eight stores in northern California and San Diego and an ecommerce site which has been active since 1996. The stores and the ecommerce site present the same Footwear etc. branding and many of the same promotions and offers. There are also offers exclusive to the stores or to the Web. The site has become very successful, selling more shoes than all of the physical stores combined.

Footwearetc.com’s fulfillment and customer service operations are robust, with same-day or next-day order handling and a customer service department of about a dozen people that handles both inbound and outbound customer service.

For a time, Footwearetc.com was the fulfillment center for Zappos.com, when Zappos was getting started.

Modernization

In 2006, Mike embarked on a series of modernization projects. The ecommerce infrastructure, developed over the previous decade, lacked features needed for the customer experience he wanted to deliver. “My first goal was to improve the ease of shopping, by improving the catalog, checkout, search and navigation,” explained Mike. His second goal was to improve marketing and merchandising efficiency by beefing up search marketing, SEO, email marketing, and testing.
To enable these improvements, Mike implemented new search, navigation and discovery; replaced the e-commerce platform; and added new tools for search marketing, email marketing, personalization, and testing.

FOOTWEARETC.COM’S FOUR E’S OF E-MERCHANDISING

The Patricia Seybold Group has developed a results-oriented, theoretical framework for e-merchandising which we call the Four E’s of E-Merchandising. We use this framework when we study an ecommerce enterprise, to provide the underlying structure for our analysis. The Four E’s are as follows:

• Environment: Setting the mood
• Education: Assisting with decisions
• Emphasis: Prioritizing products
• Excitement: Changing customer behavior

These four elements work together to reassure, inform, and persuade the customer. Every site executes the elements differently, guided by brand, target customers, and the complexities of product lines and decision processes.

With the recent modernizations, Footwear etc. executes the 4 E’s with great finesse. Footwear excels at Environment, with one of the finest home pages we’ve seen and far and away the finest shopping cart execution. Not surprisingly, given its information-oriented customer set, Footwear also excels in Education, with customer-driven product information, the full complement of ratings and reviews, and a technical blog. Footwear also shows leadership in the Excitement category, creating a social shopping aspect via “today’s popular searches.” More important for customers’ bonding with Footwear, and for Footwear’s revenue, are the personalized, tailored email campaigns. These emails, which offer products that individual customers will be interested in, have not only doubled email revenues but cut opt-outs to one quarter the former rate. Obviously, customers find the email offers relevant.

Environment: Setting the Mood

The environment sets customers’ expectations for their interactions with the products. Footwear sets the tone of interactions with its calm, soothing colors and its emphasis on information. That flow of information immediately conveys that Footwear etc. is serious about comfort and utility and that Footwear is a safe company to do business with.

The home page is a tour de force. Somehow, without feeling cluttered, and while presenting new arrivals and best sellers, it delivers the following messages:

• We have all the important brands.
• We have shoes and accessories for men, women, and children.
• You can shop by brand, size, color, and width, so it’s going to be easy to find your shoes.
• We have good prices; in fact, we have a low price guarantee.
• We are fair and even generous about returns.
• We don’t charge sales tax.
• Shipping is free on orders above $60.
• The newest technology in shoes helps you walk better, and we can explain it.
• Our site is secure.
• We’d love to talk to you: here’s our number.
• We have gift cards.
• You can track your order and view your account, or communicate with customer service.
• We support all the payment systems you use.
• BizRate honors us.
• We’ve been in business for 22 years.
• Real customers love us.
Illustration 1. Footwearetc.com home page is excellent at setting the tone for the customer experience. It is highly informative, delivering messages about prices, policy, shoe technology, and the shopping experience.
These messages are important to customers and also to Footwear etc. They collectively communicate that Footwear knows a great deal about shoes and about ecommerce, telling new customers that they are in very good hands. See Illustration 1.

The home page creates a very strong base for the other E’s of e-merchandising. It also represents the impact of the modernization projects: the new search, navigation, and discovery services from SLI Systems\(^1\) invite the shopper’s interaction, invite social shopping via Today’s Popular Searches, highlight the most popular products within the site, and optimize natural rankings on Google and other Web search engines. The new ecommerce platform, Acadaca\(^2\), has boosted page load speed and enabled the dynamic content. The testing services that Footwear deployed, Amadesa\(^3\), were used extensively during the refinement of this home page design.

### The Top Shopping Cart in Retail Today

The Footwearetc.com shopping cart experience far exceeds any I’ve encountered in a decade of heavy investigative shopping. It encourages you to continue to add items to your cart at any time during the buying process, rather than punishing you for second thoughts during checkout. Midway through entering payment information, do you want to check one more time whether these are waterproof or add a pair of socks? At every other ecommerce site ever built, if you leave during checkout, you will have to enter all of your information again when you come back. Not at Footwearetc.com: All your data is still there. And you can change size or quantity without even leaving the checkout page. As Empress of Second, Third, and Fourth Thoughts, I cannot praise Footwear highly enough for this. I can attest that by my third thought, I will not “continue shopping” or, if I do, I’m likely to give up on checkout. Three times through checkout is my limit.

---


\(^2\) [www.acadaca.com](http://www.acadaca.com)

\(^3\) [www.amadesa.com](http://www.amadesa.com)

---

In another stroke of brilliant customer service, Footwear will accept your order even if it isn’t quite correct. If the customer service team can’t make sense of an incomplete order using their history files, they will phone you to gather the missing information. I think it’s a great way to handle a customer who can’t quite follow your instructions. Footwear has created a no-hassle, no-fail environment.

### Education: Assisting with Decisions

Education, by providing enough information, helps customers make buying decisions. Footwear customers value facts, expert opinion, and customer recommendations in reaching their buying decisions. Footwearetc.com excels at efficiently delivering the information customers need. It is unique in providing descriptions that incorporate customer feedback, such as whether the shoe is true to size and reassurance that shipping will be free. Customer reviews are solicited from Footwear customers, so they are suited to the Footwear customer viewpoint, mentioning activities that interest the Footwear customer. The Footwearetc.com blog further amplifies information about how to use shoes and what to expect from them.

Footwear etc. deploys the most advanced methods of educating customers during the purchase decision, including:

- **User-Generated Search Engine Optimization.**
  What might get you to Footwear’s site, if you are not already a customer, is the great natural (aka organic, or unpaid listings) rankings Footwear etc. gets at Google. SLI Systems’ Learning Search automatically creates dynamic landing pages for search terms. The Site Champion service automatically optimizes the landing pages, including their URLs, for the search terms that are most popular on Footwear’s site. These are usually two or three word searches, for example, “Ugg Cardy” or “MBT Tunisha Black.” There are lots of these phrases, and not that many searches for each phrase, but automation makes optimization affordable. For example, there are thousands of phrases that are used by people searching for various Uggs styles. The top terms account for only a few percent of the searches. In contrast, 30-40 percent of the traffic from Google looking for MBT shoes searched for
“mbt shoes.” A marketer could manage MBT Shoes effectively by hand, but not Ugg: there are just too many search phrases. About 30,000 different search phrases resulted in 100,000 customers clicking through to Footwearetc.com from natural search results in the most recent quarter. Talk about a “long tail:” this tail is too long and too flat to manage manually. Automatically optimizing for those 30,000 terms is the real value of Site Champion. Moreover, Site Champion traffic converts higher than any other traffic sources; in fact, 70 percent higher even than paid search traffic. As a result, traffic from organic search has increased 500 percent overall, comparing the current period to the period before Site Champion’s implementation. During Q4 2008 shopping season, the organic traffic increase from these optimized pages was 2500 percent.

- **Customer Review SEO.** Footwearetc.com is one of the first users of Review Champion, a joint offering of PowerReviews and SLI Systems. Review Champion makes customer review content indexable by search engines, solving a technical problem for ecommerce site owners. Customers can now quickly find the review content they want, rather than searching for a product and clicking through to product pages hoping there will be reviews. Merchants have another shot at capturing the customer’s attention, since their pages of customer reviews now appear in Google.

- **Search Suggestions.** There are two types of search suggestions offered on the site, both provided by SLI Systems. First, as you type in the search box, you see a list of searches previously executed that are textually similar to yours: you type “ugg” and immediately a drop-down list appears that includes “ugg flip flops” and “ugg layback.” The suggestions are selected because they start with the same letters as the search phrase you are typing, but they are listed in order of relevance, and they represent successful searches performed by other visitors.

  Second, in the search results display, above the list of results, you are offered search suggestions.

Unlike the search suggestions that appear as you are typing your search terms, these search suggestions may not start with the same letters as your search. Instead, the search suggestions are chosen based on the similarity of their meaning. For example, if you search for clog, your suggested searches include “Dansko,” a brand widely known for its clogs. You can click on these suggested search phrases to see the search results.

- **Navigation by Attribute (aka Refinements or Faceted Search).** The left hand navigation area on each page invites you to “Shop by” the five attributes of brand, category, size, color, and width. The resulting list of items is automatically delivered in order by popularity. The list can be sorted by name, price, and newest – making it easy to home in on what you want.

- **Photos.** Each product has four photos, which are done in house, providing views from top, bottom, profile, and three-quarter profile. In our opinion, these photos are a fine substitute for zoom and rotate. Since they load instantly, and don’t require a new window, the approach is more efficient for the shopper.

- **Product Descriptions.** The description provides the features, benefits, and how or where to use the product. It will explain if the sizing of a particular style varies from the norm for the brand, if the style is discontinued, and if shipping is free. The tabs behind the description offer related products, additional colors, what other customers bought, and customer reviews.

- **Customer Ratings.** Customer ratings are key to the decision process. Footwear displays ratings wherever the product image appears, such as in a search results list or a navigation page.

- **Customer Reviews.** Mike encourages customer reviews by sending emails to customers a few weeks after purchase. Reviews from Footwear etc. customers contain the kind of information that Mike’s customer set is interested in, so it is important to get those reviews.
Education at Footwearetc.com

- Footwear's great photos instead of rotate/zoom widgets, for more efficient shopping.
- Expert information you really need to make a decision.
- Reassurance on shipping policy.
- Footwear helps you learn MBT technology.
- Reminder: Footwear is a good company to do business with.

Illustration 2. Footwearetc.com’s educational merchandising is meticulous. Customers are offered reviews, ratings, and what other customers bought, focusing on the data that is critical to making a decision. Footwear staff ensures that all the expert, customer-generated information becomes part of each description.
• **Blog.** The blog, accessible from a tab on the home page, introduces new products from the perspective of someone who has just used it. The information is not about how the shoe looks – after all, there are pictures. The blog describes how the shoe feels, what the wearer used it for, how long he’s been wearing it, how it compares to other shoes – just the kind of information that helps a buyer determine whether this is a good shoe for a desert hike. The blog also dives into technology and biology, as they relate to shoes and walking. The entries are pretty enjoyable, and certainly furnish lots of reasons to blow $245 on Masai Barefoot Technology. If you need a reason.

**Emphasis: Prioritizing Products**

The third E in e-merchandising stands for emphasis. E-merchandisers set product priorities by deciding which categories should be presented on the home page, and which products should be used to illustrate the search and navigation pages for each category.

The real strength of Footwear etc.’s emphasis lies in its tailored recommendations presented in related products and “other customers bought.” Not all items have information about what other customers bought, which is somewhat disappointing, but it takes time to build up this type of data.

• **Related Products.** Mike has implemented Strands⁴ Social Recommender to suggest related products, replacing manual product recommendations. Strand has been a big success, increasing recommendation sales by 75 percent, as compared to the manual process. Recommendations for returning customers are based on peoples’ actions and past history.

• **Other Customers Bought.** These products are also automatically generated by Strands Social Recommender.

• **Category Page.** When you click on a category, such as Men’s Sandals, you get a list of products sorted by popularity. You can resort by price, freshness, or name, but popularity is the top merchandising choice. Putting the best foot forward, as it were.

• **Brand Page.** The brand pages begin with a brand image in the style of a magazine ad, surrounded by a list of categories associated with the brand. A click on any of those categories brings a classic category page, filtered by brand and sorted by popularity.

• **Recently Viewed.** The navigation area of the page also includes the two items you have most recently viewed, as an aide to your quick return or for easy visual comparison with the shoe you are currently viewing. Recently Viewed items are user- emphasized items, and merchants should leverage them to make pages exciting.

**Excitement: Changing Behavior**

The e-merchandiser changes customer behavior, in part, by building excitement. E-merchandising has the power to motivate the customer to take the plunge and make the purchase. Footwear generates excitement on site by its use of Today’s Popular Searches, which introduce an element of social shopping. Its most effective excitement comes from its personalized email campaigns. By tailoring the items featured in marketing emails to each customer’s preferences, Footwear has doubled the revenues from email campaigns.

• **Email Campaigns.** Mike sends out emails nightly, although each customer will only get four to eight emails per month. The emails will present brands and styles that the customer is interested in, often new arrivals or sale items that he’s bought in the past. Exact Target, the email system, sends search requests based on the type of shoe each customer is interested in, based on customer profile information. SLI Systems returns the most popular item(s) for insertion in the email. The personalization has improved the open rate, the click through, and conversion. Email click through has increased by a factor of four; sales are up a factor of three; revenue has doubled; and unsubscribes are reduced to one quarter of what they were.

---

⁴ www.corp.strands.com
Today’s Popular Searches. This link on the home page brings up a list of today’s most frequent searches, providing a view of the other shoppers in the store. You can click on the searches to see what other shoppers are looking. The list of searches, the links, and the search results are provided by SLI Systems.
Illustration 4. Footwearetc.com’s emails are extremely effective with customers, who opt-out at a very low rate. Each email contains items chosen based on the customers’ preferences and interests, so customers see suggestions that are both relevant and attractive.
• **Featured Brands.** The featured brands have been selected manually, but will soon be personalized based on the visitors’ interests.

• **New Arrivals.** The home page cycles through the recent arrivals.

• **Best Sellers.** The home page best sellers are selected by the ecommerce platform, and are in fact the best sellers.

• **Please Select Free Gift.** Some items come with a free gift, usually socks or free shipping.

**CONCLUSION**

**Learning from Footwearetc.com**

There are six key takeaways from Footwearetc.com’s experience:

1. **Never Stop Improving.** Mike’s improvement projects have been underway for several years, “and my list isn’t getting shorter,” he says. “Research to make sure you’re doing the right thing. Keep working with vendors to turn dreams to reality. There are always ways to improve your customer experience, if you listen.”

2. **Listen; Try to Think Like a Customer.** Footwearetc.com is in close touch with customers because it has a customer service staff that talks to them every day, and because it has retail stores that provide easy access to the customer base. It uses this information about customers to design the information, the displays, and the shopping experience to suit the specific desires of the Footwear etc. customer. It’s this process that produced the great shopping cart at Footwearetc.com. “We listen through feedback, testimonials, and through conversations with Customer Service. We never stop listening. We also act like customers: we use our site to answer questions and take orders,” says Mike. “This has lead to some breakthrough changes in usability.”

3. **Make It Easy and Keep It Simple.** “Don’t add things that aren’t necessary. I don’t like clutter or features that don’t add value, just because they are cool,” advises Mike. For this reason, he uses extra photos instead of zoom and rotate widgets. They are easier and faster for customers and get the job done.

4. **Test Everything.** Mike understands that you don’t guess your way to ecommerce success. He compares how customers respond to variations in the experience before making decisions on how to deploy improvements. “Where you place something, even the color, can make a big difference. You’d be surprised,” observes Mike.

5. **Integrate Search with Marketing.** Footwearetc.com’s biggest bottom line results have come from integrating site search with search engine optimization, and with email marketing. Site search and navigation make the connection between the customer and the merchant. They act as the customer’s steering wheel and as the merchant’s gear box for propelling purchases. As Mike points out, “The search words that visitors use on Footwear.com are the same words they used on Google. We use our visitor’s words for SEO and SEM purposes, and it gives us many more chances to be found.”

6. **Take Advantage of the Functionality You’ve Purchased.** Mike advises, “Find creative ways to use the technologies you already have to improve your results. We use site search from SLI Systems to improve email campaigns, search advertising, and SEO. We use Strands recommendations to improve the home page personalization and other aspects. These two technologies can be applied in many valuable ways; I think we’ve just scratched the surface.”

**Contact Info:**

Footwearetc.com  
Mike Baranov  
Email: Mike@footwearetc.com  
Internet: www.footwearetc.com
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SUSAN E. ALDRICH is a Senior Vice President and Senior Consultant at the Patricia Seybold Group.

Aldrich is a senior analyst for the firm’s Advisory Service. As leading authority on worldwide technologies, customer requirements, practices, and governance for findability, she manages the Search, Navigation, and Discovery Research Practice. Her research focuses on customer self-service, information management and technologies and practices for monitoring, measuring, and managing the Quality of Customer Experience℠ (QCE).

Aldrich’s experience includes commercial applications development, deployment, and implementation and operating systems development. She has provided information management, customer relationship, and distributed systems management consulting worldwide.