Upgrading Search: Converting Online Shoppers into Buyers

Peter Wilkerson
Davalen LLC
Search & Discovery Practice Manager

September 2009

Summary: This document is designed to help owners of eCommerce sites identify and correct search deficiencies that may be preventing their customers from finding the products they shopping for.

Table of Contents

Introduction

As marketing and ecommerce professionals, our goal is to turn shoppers into buyers. Shoppers should easily be able to find the products they are looking for, be exposed to products we think they might also be interested in, and easily check out. This paper discusses how site search deficiencies prevent shoppers from finding the products they are interested in, provides three types of search tuning techniques that can improve the shopping experience and then provides a road map for improving search at existing ecommerce sites.

Search Deficiencies

Davalen recently conducted research that showed that 52% of IBM WebSphere Commerce Server websites might be neglecting as many as half of their potential

customers by not providing them with the search tools they need. To conduct the research, we visited all websites running WebSphere Commerce Server and searched for a product whose name we spelled incorrectly. Say, for example, that a site was selling women's clothing. By visiting the site and searching for "blous" we discovered whether the internal search solution could handle common misspellings. You can validate your own site's performance by performing a similar search. On your site locate your search page and purposefully misspell one of the products offered for sale. If the search returns no results or meaningless ones then your site's search engine is seriously impaired. A properly tuned site will suggest a proper spelling and return the results for it.

Likewise, suppose you maintain a site for wood-workers and crafters. Suppose you search for "shoe." Did you mean the shoe of a wood plane, a paintable sneaker, a shoe shaped cutout, a shoetree, a pattern for a shoeshine kit? How will your site help a potential buyer sort out potentially messy search results?

A colleague, Chris Barker, described another scenario. In his example, an online retailer offers books to prospective customers. Imagine a customer seeking a resource for finding synonyms but unable to remember what to call such a thing. The customer clicks on the search bar and enters "SYNONYM FINDER." To this, the server responds: "0 ITEMS match your search." A properly tuned site will ask if you meant "thesaurus" and return the results for it.

Again, you may evaluate your own site's performance. In conversation with your product placement staff, determine the name of a product that is ambiguous. Enter this term and if the results are meaningless or inconsistent with your expectation then the site engine is not properly tuned.

In each of these scenarios, the unsatisfied shopper may likely move on to the next online store. Each customer's business was lost because the online store was using basic search. Leaving customers with basic search is like opening a store with no employees. The average customer feels abandoned after a failed search.

How pervasive are these problems? In 2009, Davalen LLC research revealed 147 of 267 sites operated by US retailers using IBM WebSphere Commerce were unable to handle commonly misspelled search terms. This research used a test method similar to the one described in our imaginary women's clothing site.

The initial investment in an IBM WebSphere Commerce site can be measured in many hundreds of thousands of dollars. Considering this, it is stunning that companies hobble these sites with inadequate internal search solutions.

After all the investment it should be patently evident; "If customers can't find it, they won't buy it." Do customers really rely on internal search? Don't they instead rely on

internet search engines? First, consider this, experts in the field of online retail estimate the volume of users relying upon internal search to find and buy items range between 20% and 50% of a site's overall traffic. Sites with an inadequate search solution ignore a significant online market segment. Second, when sites rely on internet based search engines to provide access to their catalog of products they will discover that these same engines will list their competitors just as easily.

Search Engine Tuning

Davalen's search practice methodology, derived from our experience in diverse industries, tunes search results and optimizes user experience in three ways:

1. Content-based Tuning makes sure that the right products are in the result set for given searches. While most search engines will return products based on text found in a product's description, it is also important to consider alternate spellings, synonyms and related concepts. We ask our customers if their search platform can differentiate between a search for a given product and accessories for that product. For example, can their search platform differentiate between bikes and bike helmets when a user enters "bikes" as the search term?

2. Marketing-based Tuning focuses on product placement within a result set; a very useful tool for Marketing Departments. This type of tuning identifies which products should appear at the top of a result set based on a company's understanding of their customers' needs and expectations. Moving winter-related products to the top of the search results page during the winter season sales cycle is an example of marketing-based tuning.

3. Customer Behavior-based Tuning uses the knowledge of which products are most popular and to make sure they appear closer to the top of a search results list. This powerful tool is especially important for managing product placement.

Roadmap to Search Success

Davalen's road map to search success consists of three stages:

I. Assessment
II. Development of a search implementation plan
III. Execution of this plan to achieve search integration, optimization, and tuning

The first step in the road map is to assess how a site's search and discovery experience measures up in the market place. Knowing where a site's search capabilities stand in

relation to others in the market is a strong indicator of its competitive position. Since search can be used to position products, drive navigation, and present shoppers with meaningful choices, this evaluation is mandatory and of strategic importance.

The outcome of the assessment provides the basis for search implementation plan. This plan delivers a strategic initiative to satisfy clients concerns with:
- Security and Confidentiality
- Integration
- Accuracy
- Straight-forward implementation

The execution of the search implementation plan is designed to meet the needs of shoppers and the goals of the retailer to deliver a competitive and successful online retail site.

Conclusion

Operators of ecommerce sites that help their customers find products by upgrading site search capability can expect a high return on investment. While most sites will benefit by continuously tuning their site search, those with no advanced search capability have the most to gain. Davalen helps clients improve the rate of shopper to buyer conversions by assessing their current site search capability, creating a road map for achieving the proper search capability for their type of store, and assisting with search upgrades.

Works Cited

Chris Barker. (2009). *WebSphere Commerce Server Site Search Study.* Lynchburg: Davalen LLC.

About the Author

Peter has been implementing Search & Discovery solutions for over 20 years. He has worked with clients to analyze their business drivers, available data, and current user trends. He then uses that information to develop search and discovery implementation strategies. His work includes working with Line of Business users to develop solutions and with IT departments to implement them. He has developed and implemented site search solutions for a number of WebSphere Commerce projects and has developed ways which expand search beyond mere text matching to include customer behavior and marketing goals as a way of influencing product placement within search results.

He has a Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) from the University of Kentucky and worked with the Society of American Archivists to develop a workshop on Subject Analysis. He co-authored Introduction to Archival Organization and Description

from the Getty Information Institute. He has also led workshops on analyzing metadata in light of business needs and goals and how that can improve search and discovery solutions.

He maintains a blog on Search and Discovery topics and has a webinar presentation on Site Search Personalization for retail websites.

Trademarks