

Site Search Best Practices

1. **Site search functionality is one of the top site features you should optimize.** Search is the #1 discovery tool for users, especially when you have a large product catalog. The Revenue per Visit for site search users is commonly 4x that of non-users. Customers always expect search to yield results. If it doesn't, they will leave. It is absolutely crucial that your search feature produces relevant results at lightning speed – implement a search engine (either in-house or use a third-party tool) that categorizes your product catalog in the most relevant way possible.
2. **Clean up product data in order to produce relevant search results.** Your frontend search experience relies on the quality of your backend data. Do not forget to look at your underlying product data and be prepared to spend significant effort to expand and/or improve it. This includes identifying and creating product attributes, product descriptions, and categories. Maintain your data integrity at all times in order for frontend search results to be accurate, relevant and conversion-driving.
3. **A good search experience means a great search results page.** Develop an engaging and well-designed search results page that showcases relevant products at default. The search results page is where your users will convert to your product detail page, where most conversions happen.
4. **Find the right search solution.** Do due diligence in determining if the solution you wish to integrate will help, by how much, and what the end result is in your customers' ability to find your products. Your data may work for one search tool, but not another. Think about provider nuances.
5. **Make your search query highly visible and accessible to the customer.** A customer should be able to access your search function quickly and effortlessly. Do not make them hunt for it. Display it at the same place on every page, with the exception of checkout. Test different positions on the page to see which is most effective. Again, since site search users are so much more valuable, the key is to encourage as much usage as possible.
6. **A search should never come back with "0 results".** Be sure to implement the capability of correcting misspelled terms, using synonyms, suggesting comparable brands, products or categories. Additionally, analyze your data to understand what customers are searching for. It can also help you identify products you should be carrying. If possible, restructure the search query on the backend to display the closest keyword recommendation (and products) available, i.e., "Did you mean...".
7. **Use Auto-Complete to reduce spelling errors as well as increase the likelihood of the query returning product results.** Users that don't know the spelling for an item only need to type the first few letters to find a possible match. Even with the help of auto-complete, make sure you still provide search results for common misspellings. Many engines now support insertion of product images into type-ahead suggestions; this feature very effectively boosts conversion.
8. **Dynamic refinement and sorting are crucial.** Generic terms can often result in many products showing up. Having a dynamic sorting tab is crucial to narrowing down results to the right products.
9. **Don't forget to tag searched keywords, results page interactions and attribute conversions from search.** Tag all search interactions in your analytics platform, and ensure that you are attributing conversions from search.
10. **Search terms provide insight into how customers are wording/phrasing search terms.** You may find that customers use different wording or language to search for products. Identify the keywords and add them to your synonym library. Popular search terms can help you determine what should be promoted to the navigation.
11. **Balance the ranking and relevancy of search results with the ability to control where products appear in the list.** You can also control the content that is displayed, based on a specific search query. Your margins are a factor, as well, and should be included in algorithms that determine display order.
12. **When a shopper is performing a site search, query is the best time to maximize all your merchandising capabilities.** Present up-sell and cross-sell opportunities as part of the return. Combine personalization tools and collaboration with search to maximize likelihood of purchase.
13. **Search should be usable.** Allow customers to use the "enter" key on their keyboard to search. Another example: Save your customer the trouble of having to clear the instructional text that is in the box such as "Search by keyword, product name, or sku". The text should disappear when the user clicks inside the box so they can type their own input. Above all, make search simple and easy to use!

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Site Search Key Questions to Ask Providers

Company

1. How long have you been in this business?
2. How many customers have you sold? How many have left your platform, and why?
3. Is your solution geared more toward enterprise or the SMB space? What types of clients fall into your “sweet spot”? Won any awards in that space?
4. What peripheral or support services do you offer (e.g., cross-sell, analytics, SEM services, consulting, implementation)?

Products/Services

1. Is your solution offered as perpetual licensed software or on-demand multi-tenant solution?
 - If perpetual license:**
 - a. What are the hosting requirements?
 - b. How complex is the installation process? What specialized skills are needed? What kind of assistance do you provide? Can a third-party help?
 - If SAAS/ASP:**
 - a. What features do I lose by not subscribing to a higher tier?
 - b. What can I do if I need a feature you don't have or plan to have soon?
2. What internal resources (technical/marketing/analytical) will I need to maximize the value of your product and how many hours per month will they spend?
3. How long will a simple installation take? A sophisticated one?
4. What data does the search engine index?
5. What makes your search algorithm different & better?
6. Do you offer a free trial? What's missing in the trial version?
7. What technical support services are available?
 - a. Are there human beings I can reach during reasonable hours (chat or phone) or do I have to wait over 24 hours for an email response or callback? Is your support team located in the US or abroad?
 - b. What is your SLA for support issues?
8. Do you have a support knowledge base, community forum, or applications that are shared by customers?
9. How do I ensure I own and control my data in the event I need to change platforms?

Features

1. What key features are in your solution? What features are missing? On your roadmap? Does management love? Shoppers?
 - c. Do you have spelling correction, synonyms, refine search, sort, etc.?
2. Where is your product's competitive advantage over other site search packages?
 - a. Search algorithm, query processing? Display flexibility? Third-party support? Price?
3. How does your search algorithm work?
 - a. What data, in what structure, is optimal for using your features? Do I have to completely reorganize my databases in order to use your product? If not, how does it work?
4. Beyond translating queries into relevant results, what features can I manipulate to improve the overall customer experience?
5. How does your solution integrate with my eCommerce, analytics, and personalization packages?
 - a. Please list the applications for which you have standard integrations already built.
 - b. Please list the applications where you have built custom integrations.
6. Do you have a management console?
 - a. Is it web-based, does it include reporting and a dashboard?
 - b. Please describe your reporting capabilities (standard reports, batch vs. real-time, ad hoc, etc.).
7. How do your reporting functions work? How do I ensure the data does not conflict with other systems?

Pricing

1. For software providers, do you provide a perpetual license for all my sites, one license per site, license based on users or other?
2. For SAAS providers, do you price based on page views, queries, bandwidth, etc.?
3. Are there any additional fees (e.g., implementation, transaction costs, overages, etc.)?
4. Please provide an estimate of my total annual cost for your service, including an ROI model. How much will I need to improve sales in order to justify this investment?

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