

5 Overlooked Search Engine Issues That Steal Your Sales

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Introduction

If shoppers have trouble finding something in a brick-and-mortar store, they can ask a salesperson to direct them. Real-world retailers know their sales suffer if people who come in looking for that specific product can't find what they need. They also know these customers are very valuable. They're more likely to buy, and less likely to come back if they have a bad experience. That's why they put a lot of effort into organizing merchandise and training their employees to help.

Online shoppers don't have the luxury of salespeople to ask. Your search engine fulfills that role. So, it needs to be trained—just like an employee—to know not only what you sell, but also all the terminology people use for the many products on your site. If your search engine doesn't know these things, it can't lead your customers to the right place, and you lose sales.

According to online retail consultant Screen Pages, eCommerce website visitors who use search **complete purchases at a rate of 4.63% versus the websites' average of 2.77%. That's a rate of 1.8 times higher for people using search. Consequently, these visitors contribute 13.8% of the revenues to the websites in the study.**¹

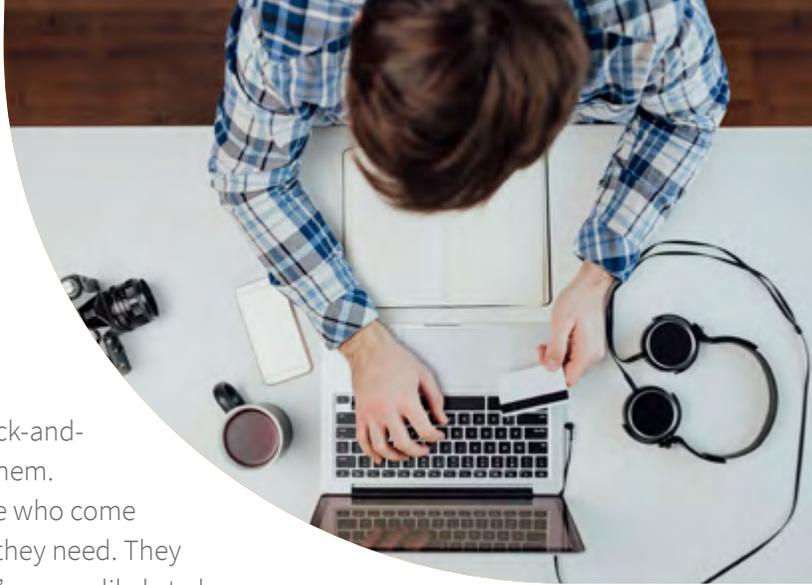
Yet, according to another report, **only 50% of eCommerce site searches are successful.**² That's half of your qualified customers not finding what they need.

Loyalty is on the line as well as sales, because the risk of losing customers is amplified online. In the real world, it takes time and effort to drive to a different store, so shoppers will work harder to find that they need. But online, it's pretty easy to type a competitor's name into a browser—might even be faster than continuing to use a bad search engine. Not only do you lose a sale this time, but next time, that customer will be more likely to go to your competitor first.

The reporting tools many retailers use will give you some insight into sales you're losing due to your search, but they may not illuminate your most pressing problems—or your biggest opportunities. In my years of working with eCommerce companies, from global giants to small businesses, and all kinds of search platforms, I've seen the following five “under-the-radar” issues significantly hurt sales again and again.

¹ Econsultancy blog, “Is site search less important for niche retailers?”, March 2013

² Econsultancy, Site Search Report, July 2010



1. Don't Ignore the Tail

If you look at all the queries your customers type into your search engine, you'll see a few really popular ones that most likely relate to your top-selling items. You'll have a few more that appear half to a third as many times. And then you'll have everything else. This final category is what we call "the long tail."

If you were to plot the number of times you see each query on a graph, it would look something like this:



It's tempting to write off your tail queries as meaningless junk, and concentrate all your efforts on making sure your search is delivering top-notch results for the more popular queries. That's where the biggest returns are, right?

Not necessarily. Taken on a case-by-case basis, tail queries might not seem important. But in aggregate, they may add up to almost half your total queries. They're likely to give you important insights into sales you're missing.

One category of things we usually find in the tail is long, specific queries. For example, a site that sells computers may have a lot of queries for "laptop," and relatively few for "Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon." These long queries happen less frequently, but they also show a higher intent to buy, and they convert at a higher rate. When someone is looking for a Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon, she has likely already done some research, and has either already decided what she's going to buy, or is very close to it.

Misspellings, alternate spellings and abbreviations also make up a lot of tail queries. If British people search for a "grey" T-shirt instead of the "gray" T-shirt listed on your American eCommerce site, will your search engine direct to them to the right page? When people type in "cauliflower," will they still get their vegetables? If you ignore these kinds of queries, and don't teach your search engine what to do with them, you're missing out on conversions. Taken in aggregate, the lost sales can add up to some pretty significant numbers.

2. Presentation Matters

For eCommerce sites, the search results list page is like the front window of a Main Street or mall shop, the end-aisle displays at the grocery store, the mannequins at a department store. Everything should look good, hang together and be accurate.

On an eCommerce site, the search results generally include an image, title, description, price and link for each item returned. All of these things should be correct and helpful to shoppers.

Use high-quality, relevant images

Imagine if someone types in “shower curtain,” only to see a page of images of an entire bathroom that includes a shower curtain—and also rugs, towels, towel bars, and other accoutrements. The customer might take one look and think “I don’t want all that stuff,” and not click through.

Or say you sell a raincoat in red, yellow and blue, but to save time and money, you use the same photo of the yellow one for all three product pages. Whenever someone searches for the red or blue version, they’ll only ever see the wrong color.

Similarly, low-quality images can be worse than having no photo at all. Ensure the items pictured are big or clear enough to see (even for older eyes!), well-lit and in focus.

Write descriptive titles

Your page titles should fully describe the products they introduce, including brand name and also size, color, weight, material or any other defining characteristics. You want the titles to guide your customers to the right place, and make their buying decisions easier.

Get the price right

Prices should be accurate and consistent on every page where they appear. When you change the price of an item, make sure you change it everywhere: page title, product page, etc. If customers see different prices for the same item as they go through the purchase path, they may think you’re trying to trick them—and leave.



3. Not Everyone is Shopping

Not just for selling, websites are also full of information about your business: contact and customer service information, order status, privacy and return policies, and the like. Yet this aspect is very often overlooked — and underserved by search engines.

Here's a great example. Say a customer wants to return a book purchased on a bookseller's site. He enters "refund and return policy" in the search field. The results include Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi on DVD, return of the King, by J.R.R Tolkien, Return to Summerhouse by Jude Deveraux and 50,000 more similar results to sift through, with no way to filter for what he's actually looking for. This is a very common problem for eCommerce sites. It might not translate directly to lost sales, but it does cause poor experiences that affect brand reputation, customer satisfaction and loyalty.

The fix is relatively simple: creating a search index for these kinds of queries that's separate from your product catalog.

4. Zero Results are Bad; Irrelevant Results are Worse

The dreaded "We're sorry" message: that's a bad experience for your customers. What's even worse is giving them a mountain of wrong results. Someone looking for "red nail polish" doesn't want press-on nails, nail clippers or nail files. Your customers may think they made a mistake, that your search engine is broken or that you don't have what they want so you're trying to sell them something else.

The "zero results" problem is an easier one to solve; many reporting tools on the market can help you there. Irrelevant results are harder to identify, and only the right tools can catch them, giving you insights into the cause of the problem, and how to address it.

5. Mobile is Changing the Game

People are increasingly using their mobile devices to shop. From a search perspective, that means it's important to accommodate queries from voice-recognition apps like Amazon Alexa and Echo, Apple Siri, Google Now and others.

What's to accommodate? The spoken queries are in a more "natural language," and tend to be longer and use more verbs and fillers (like "uh" and "so") than those entered on desktop computers, which use more nouns and adjectives. For example, a desktop query might be "dog sedative," whereas a mobile-voice query might be "sedatives for my dog." That's why it's more important than ever for your search to process natural language, and understand which terms to search (sedatives, dog) and which to ignore (for, my).



Conclusion

As you can see, there is often a simple answer for these chronic problems that plague your search and hijack sales—often without you even knowing they exist.

Query relevance evaluation is vital to clients looking to improve the search experience for their users. Natural language queries require a human evaluation element to interpret the query, assess the user intent, and ensure that relevant and useful results are returned to the user. Even a query as seemingly simple as the word "blue" could be looking for any of the following: a description or picture of the color, a television show, a credit card, a misspelling of an electronic cigarette brand, or a rap artist. By analyzing what the most likely user intent is and returning valid and appropriate results in the correct order of relevance, shoppers can find what they are looking for more quickly, and eCommerce retailers can increase their conversion rates.

Appen uses an established global network of local experts who have the language and cultural knowledge necessary to best interpret queries from users in their region. Our evaluators work with established tools and processes that are constantly being updated to allow for the most efficient analysis of queries and intents. Our management team for these programs continuously strives to further our collaboration with our clients and advance and evolve the programs to provide higher levels of accuracy.

To learn more about Appen's Search Relevance services, contact us at [appen.com](https://www.appen.com).

About Us

Appen is a global leader in the development of high-quality, human annotated datasets for machine learning and artificial intelligence. Appen brings over 20 years of experience capturing and enriching a wide variety of data types including speech, text, image and video. With deep expertise in more than 180 languages and access to a global crowd of over 400,000 skilled contractors, Appen partners with leading technology, automotive and eCommerce companies - as well as governments worldwide - to help them develop, enhance and use products that rely on natural languages and machine learning.



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