Essential Tips for Improving Your Brand’s Search Performance in Online Stores from Amazon to ZooPlus
Looking for a Needle in a Haystack; the Secret Sauce for Search Performance & Optimization in the Online Channel

Shoppers will only buy your products if they can find them. But with more and more consumers abandoning brick and mortar retailers for the world wide web, winning the online store Search Performance and Optimization battle is fast emerging a brand's biggest challenge in the digital shopping era.

The advent of the 'search bar' has got to be the most significant change to how consumers navigate the path to purchase in half a century. Instead of trawling up one aisle and down the next hunting for items on their shopping lists, online shoppers simply type in a few search phrases and expect the products to come to them.

Brands have long been aware of the importance of search engine optimization when it comes to their own web sites. We all have teams whose job it is to ensure that we get to the top of the search results page on Google, Bing or Baidu. But achieving the top spot in each of your key online retailers is a different day's work, and will likely have a greater impact where it counts, in terms of product sales.

In this paper and accompanying webinar we look at four things brands can do today to dramatically improve online store Search Performance in order to win in the digital channel and beyond.
Online Store Search

Online store Search engines are different from the more familiar global internet search providers. In Google, Bing or Baidu the focus is on delivering a list of the most relevant page results for your key phrase – in the online store, Search is all about driving sales.

Numerous studies show the different behaviors of online shoppers: In most online stores today the majority of ‘adds-to-basket’ involve products that are found through free text Search, while other purchases may come from consumers navigating down the Menu structure. Amazon reports a particularly high Search bias on its online stores around the world with more than 70 percent of shoppers using keyword Search to find the items they eventually buy.

However, actual online sales, or adds to basket, are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the importance of online store Search performance. In the majority of categories today the online channel is just as important for the influence it exerts on other channels than it is for eCommerce sales in its own right.

Industry watchers, including Deloitte, Forrester, Kantar and PWC, all point to the significant impact of online browsing on other channels. Anything from 50 to 75 per cent of in-store sales initially start with an online store Search or a mobile app. In the US, for example, Amazon.com has become the go-to site for pre-purchase product research, with 44 percent of US consumers starting their product searches on Amazon, more than all search engines combined. Of those, 87 per cent ultimately buy elsewhere, demonstrating that winning off-line is increasingly dependent on first winning online.

Winning Online Store Search

Where your products rank in terms of online store Search matters a lot. When your brand is returned in the top four or five positions on a Search results page, it’s analogous to having ‘eye-level’ placement on a physical shelf. So how do you beat the odds and rank highest in the online stores that are most important for your categories? The real answer is that ultimately your approach will need to be slightly different for each online store – because not only is online store Search different from general internet Search, but each store has its own proprietary Search algorithm.

However, the good news is there are a few things you can focus on that will work across the majority of online stores to deliver significant improvements in online store Search Performance and Optimization across the board.

There is a direct link between Search and Sales in the online channel. The better your Search performance, the higher your sales – which in turn leads to better Search performance and even more sales. But every brand is already working hard to maximize sales, in this paper we look at four key areas to focus on in order to deliver better Search performance in online stores. They are:

- Availability
- Page Content
- Price
- Consumer Engagement
Availability

Having consistent and reliable product Availability is foundational to success in any retail channel.

However, Availability is especially important in the online context as it will also impact a brand’s Search performance, now and in the future.

Many eCommerce Search engines hide products that are out-of-stock. This means that when a consumer searches a product category, items that are unavailable will not show up on their Search results pages. Other online stores return out-of-stock items, but rank them at the very end of the Search results, hence about as far from ‘eye-level’ as they can be. In either case, by becoming unavailable, the brand has lost the immediate opportunity for a sale.

But it gets worse. Many online store Search engines effectively punish brands for going out of stock by continuing to rank them lower in Search results even when they come back into stock. As such allowing a product to go out-of-stock will also jeopardize future sales.

A key advantage of the online channel is that manufacturers can track store level availability more readily than in the physical world, and adjust accordingly. Brands that are proactive in monitoring and maintaining online retailer inventory and Availability will quickly gain an advantage over those who take a more passive approach.
As we know in the world of Search engine optimization the mantra is ‘Content is King’

The same exhortation applies in the online store. On the digital shelf there are no physical products for consumers to touch and feel, so content is the primary driver of consideration and conversion. But before consumers even get to that first moment of truth, the right Content populated with appropriate keywords is fundamental to enabling buyers to find your products via Search.

Depending on the eCommerce site there are usually a number of content elements that need to be optimized in order to rank highest for Search. Breaking down the Content into key areas such product page title, description, image, and enhanced Content makes it easier to address this important task.

First and foremost, creating the perfect product page title is something of an art. It needs to encompass a number of elements, within a limited number of characters. At the very least for Search optimization it should include the functional name, brand, product size, and as many category keywords as make sense within the restricted format. A good product title will include all the information a shopper requires to understand what your product is, and whether it’s a potential fit for his or her particular need state.

A good example comes from a product that consistently performs well for Search on Amazon.com - “PURA D’OR Hair Loss Prevention Therapy Premium Organic Argan Oil Shampoo, 16 Fluid Ounce”. The key indication and benefit, hair loss prevention, is called out, as are important features and ingredients that shoppers might include in their free text searches, such as ‘organic’ and ‘Argan oil’.

After the title comes the description, which enables brands to go beyond function and explain product benefits to shoppers. Again the focus should be on category keywords in this section, while the amount of detail required will depend heavily on the category your product sits in and the online store involved. On Amazon.com for example there is a preference for bullet points rather than blocks of text.

The importance of Extended Content, such as nutrition panels and ingredients, varies radically by category and while there is not much empirical evidence to show a direct link between Images and Search results, Image is a vital area of content that cannot be ignored.

Optimizing Content in your most important online stores is going to be an iterative and ongoing process involving testing and measuring the impact of Content changes on Search performance. As competitors change and new products, with new Content, are added to your categories the effectiveness of your own product Content will be impacted.
Price

Balancing price and promotions to optimize sales volume can boost Search performance.

Readers might wonder how the price of an item could possibly impact Search results, but while the link may not be direct, there is a link all the same. Retailing 101 tells us that Price and Sales are closely linked – you drop the price of your product, sales volume will likely go up as consumers identify a deal.

As we said earlier on in this paper there is a virtuous connection between Search rank and sales and back to Search again. But the correlation is not just about sales value, in many online retail stores it is more to do with sales volume. So therefore balancing price and promotions to optimize sales volume can provide a significant boost for your products’ Search performance.

The relationship is vitally important when it comes to launching a new product in the online channel. If the new product is supported by an appropriate level of promotion – enough to drive sales volumes early on – it can gain from a bump in Search results that can deliver benefits in the long run in terms of Search weighting.

Ratings & Reviews

Reviews are now an essential part of the eCommerce shopper journey.

Not every retailer supports user-generated content such as star ratings and product reviews, but a growing number do, and where they are available they have a significant influence on the path to purchase, conversion and sales. There are dozens of studies that speak to the influence of Rating & Reviews on shoppers’ buying decisions. A UK study from 2015 states that 61 percent of customers read online reviews before making a purchase, according to a further study in the US 90 percent of shoppers who read reviews are influenced by them when it comes to making buying decisions.

Reviews are now an essential part of the eCommerce shopper journey and on top of that we are also seeing that depth and level of engagement with reviewers has an impact on Search outcomes in online stores. As such brands that work to monitor and improve the quality and quantity of their Ratings and Reviews can also improve Search performance and thus their chances of being added to basket.

Working to generate a high number reviews, with positive product ratings will help with conversion on many levels, and in particular answering questions or responding to reviews as appropriate appears to also drive better Search results.
Conclusion

For brands to succeed in any channel, consumers need to be able to easily find their products among the thousands of options available to them on the shelf.

Online, however, as we know there is no shelf, success is determined by how well products rank for keywords on Search results pages. In the online context, the brands that focus on the four key areas – Availability, Page Content, Price, and Consumer Engagement – are best positioned to increase sales in this fast-growing channel.