



How Do New Consumer Search Behaviours Affect Online Conversions?

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Introduction

The current European e-commerce industry is worth over £111 billion¹ - a value that has increased 18% since 2013 and is set to rise to £154 billion by the end of 2015.² Just as the world of e-commerce has evolved, so too have consumer search habits. The search environment in 2014 is driven by speed and accuracy; customers want to find exactly what they are looking for, as quickly as possible. With the rapid adoption of smartphones and tablets, the demands of the consumer for a more advanced search capability mean traditional keyword search tools are unlikely to satisfy the needs of your customers. Today, effective site search is not defined by a multitude of results, but by a relevant and targeted selection that meets the specific requirements of a search user.

¹ Centre for Retail Research, 'Online Retailing: Britain, Europe and the US 2014', February 2014

² Centre for Retail Research, February 2014

Optimising Site Search for the New Consumer

Multi-channel retailers now are now faced with a new challenge. How to best optimise site search to cater to these new search behaviours? A critical part of this task involves understanding the needs of mobile and tablet users.

The Mobile Scene

55% of consumers in the UK now own a smartphone

(CRR, Feb 2014)

Mobile traffic has increased **125%** since 2012

(BrightEdge, Aug 2013)

28% of UK customers have visited a retail site from a mobile device in the last 3 months

(CRR, Feb 2014)

32% of UK online sales were made via a mobile device in Q4 2013

(IMRG, Feb 2014)

31.8% of site traffic for major retailer John Lewis came from mobile over the festive period

(Econsultancy, Jan 2014)

Whilst site traffic from mobile is increasing, conversion rates are generally lower than on desktop and laptop. But it would be disastrous for retailers to overlook mobile on this basis when 33% of customers begin their product discovery journey on a brand website with a mobile device.³

For a visitor to buy your product, first they need to be able to find it, and on mobile devices this search journey needs to take place in as few clicks as possible.

³ Google/Nielson, 'Mobile Path to Purchase Custom Study', November 2013

The Rise of Natural Language Search

It isn't just the search journey that is changing as consumers grow more comfortable with mobile technology. The language of search has also altered significantly. With the introduction of language recognition software like Apple's Siri and Google's Google Now & Google Search, consumer search phrases have moved away from simple keyword lists to conversational phrases and long-tail terms, and most traditional search solutions struggle with these increasingly sophisticated terms.

A richer search experience

As a result, site search tools have needed to adapt to facilitate the intricacies of natural language, which can't be catered for with traditional search functionality. This advanced Natural Language Search (NLS) technology is capable of delivering a far richer search experience to users, aiding speedier product discovery by returning a list of precise, relevant results. Thanks to complex linguistic processing, NLS is able to understand the intent of a customer query as well as the literal content. For example, if a customer is using his/her iPhone and is looking for a fleece they could use the Siri voice input function to speak the natural language search query "I'm looking for a women's fleece jacket under £100" just as if they were speaking to a store associate.

The screenshot displays a search results page for The North Face. The search query is "I'm looking for a women's fleece jacket under £100". The results are filtered to show 37 products and 10 articles and stories. The search results are sorted by relevance. The left sidebar contains filters for Activity, Technologies, Colour, Size, and Price Group. The main content area shows six product listings:

Product Name	Price	Special Features
Women's Storm Shadow	£ 85.00	★ Best Seller
Women's 100 Aurora	£ 65.00	
Women's Kyoshi Full Zip	£ 85.00	
Women's 100 Glacier Full Zip Fleece	£ 50.00	
Women's 100 Long Sleeve Masonic Hoodie	£ 65.00	
Women's 100 Glacier Full Zip Fleece	£ 50.00	★ Best Seller

An example of The North Face using Natural Language Processing

The linguistic processor built into the tool is able to automatically interpret the key information from this phrase and filter out the conversational words, combining context with relevancy. Speech terms like 'I'm', 'looking' and 'for' will be removed, and the intelligent tool is able to recognise the other words in the right context. The term 'women's' is understood to be a gender attribute, 'jacket' is recognised as a product, 'fleece' as a material attribute and 'under £100' as a price attribute.

Once the context is identified, the relevancy is introduced. So whilst multiple fleeces might be available, those above £100 in price would be superseded in the results by those under £100, in order to return the most accurate match for the original search phrase.

How can retailers benefit?

This unique search technology can be utilised by retailers to increase the conversion potential of their site by catering to the two types of visitor; the browser and the buyer. Browsers at the start of the product research phase will come to a retail site to see the selection of options available that meet their criteria, and will use site search to sort through the wider product catalogue to find relevant items. Buyers who have already decided on a product will use site search to take them directly to their chosen item with intent to purchase.

The speed and ease of navigation that comes with advanced site search can have a highly beneficial impact on conversion rates. In fact, on average visitors who use a natural language based search tool have a basket abandonment rate of as little as 2%, compared a 40% abandonment rate for those using plain text search boxes⁴, demonstrating how revenue can be significantly improved with the help of accurate site search.

⁴ Retail Integration Online, '4 Ways Site Search Can Increase Can Increase Conversions', November 2012

How to Ensure You Return Accurate Search Results

For a customer, whether in browsing or buying mode, the accuracy of search results is paramount. But how can retailers ensure their site search experience is meeting customer expectations?

1. Keep it relevant

Relevancy is the key to delivering accurate results, and, as mentioned, to improve the relevancy of search results you need to understand the context of the search. This can be solved through Natural Language Processing, which allows the customer to be far more explicit in their search phrases.

Never return 'No results'

In certain cases a customer search query may return zero search results, but displaying a 'No results found' page creates an automatic barrier to purchase. Instead, alternative products can be pre-selected to display for search terms that would typically display no results, to produce extra conversion opportunities.

Relaxation of terms

In order to display alternative results, retailers may choose to set up certain 'relaxation' rules to temporarily ignore the terms of the search criteria that cannot be met. For example, whilst a customer may receive no results from a search for 'skinny black jeans', a retailer may choose to temporarily ignore the 'skinny' style attribute to produce an alternative selection of black jeans based on the remaining requirements.

The search results page would then display a message to notify the user that no results had been found for 'black skinny jeans', but that X amount of matches had appeared for 'black jeans' instead.

Auto-complete and spell correct

Another way to eliminate the dreaded 'No results' page is to implement sophisticated auto-complete and spell correction tools. Advanced search-as-you-type (SayT) functionality can set up by retailers to pre-empt a customer's complete search phrase, displaying suggested search terms, products, categories and even budgetary options to make it even easier for a user to find precisely what they are looking for.

The screenshot shows the Andertons Music Co. website header with the text "Celebrating 50 years as the Musicians No.1 Superstore!" and a phone number "01483 456777". A search bar contains the text "yama". A dropdown menu displays search suggestions for "yama":

- yamaha
- yamaha thr
- yamaha pacifica
- yamaha guitar
- yamaha thr10c

Below the suggestions, there are three columns of data:

Products	total: 405	Category	total: 7
Yamaha MG166CXUSB 16 Channel Mixer With USB	£269.00	Guitars (111)	
Yamaha P35 Digital Piano in Black	£349.00	Drums (75)	
Yamaha HS7 Active Studio Monitor	£177.00	Keyboards & Pianos (145)	
Yamaha PSRE343 Keyboard inc. PSU	£165.00	Pro Audio (28)	
Yamaha PSRE243 Keyboard inc. PSU	£124.00	Computers (8)	

On the right side of the dropdown, there is a 'Price' column with a total of 16 items, listing price ranges and their corresponding counts:

Price	total: 16
Less than £10	(3)
£10 - £25	(13)
£25 - £50	(23)
£50 - £100	(45)
£100 - £200	(59)
£200 - £300	(56)
£300 - £400	(23)
£400 - £500	(26)
£500 - £750	(69)
£750 - £1000	(21)
£1000 - £1500	(27)
£1500 - £2000	(13)
£2000 - £2500	(7)
£2500 - £3000	(6)
£3000 - £5000	(10)
£5000 - £10000	(4)

Advanced auto-complete as demonstrated by Andertons Music Company

Further refinements to search terms can also uncover additional revenue opportunities. By reviewing the most frequent 'no results' searches retailers can quickly discover regularly searched products that are not currently stocked, but that have a high demand.

2. Don't return too many results

Returning too many results can be just as much of a barrier to conversion as returning zero. Site visitor studies have noted that search users rarely venture into the second page of search results, and returning an unreasonably high number of options can convey an inaccurate search (unless the search term was suitably broad to begin with).

The perfect selection

An effective search tool won't look to return the largest number of results, but the right selection of results. Customers, whether browsing or buying, use site search to improve the ease of navigation and transaction, and, in the case of the Power Shopper, to arrive at a concise and relevant list of products that are available to purchase as quickly as possible.

Reduce the number of clicks

The more accurate and refined your site search is, the fewer clicks required for a customer to reach your checkout page. Advanced search tools can take the number of clicks down from 6–10 clicks to only 1-3 clicks, which significantly reduces basket abandonment rates.

Combine search with dynamic filtering

Dynamic filters work alongside your site search to offer customers the option to further refine search results. These filters need to be highly adaptive, so you can dynamically serve up a set of relevant refinement options that are unique to each individual search.

For example, if a user searched for 'guitar', then the main navigation categories that include 'drums' and 'keyboard' would be completely irrelevant. Instead, a retailer can configure primary and secondary navigation filters to be dynamically replaced with specific criteria that would be more relevant for a search on guitars such as 'hollow body guitar' or 'left handed guitar'.

The screenshot shows a search results page for 'electric guitar'. At the top, a red banner reads 'Your search results'. Below this, the breadcrumb path is 'Home > Search results for "electric guitar" > Electric Guitars'. The results are displayed as 'Results 1-12 of 1810' with 'Results per page: 12 24 48 100'. There are view options for grid and list views. A message states: 'We found results for "electric guitar" with these synonyms: "gu...'. The main content area shows two guitar products. The first is a yellow hollow-body electric guitar with a 'BEST SELLER!' badge. The second is a black solid-body electric guitar. On the left side, there are two filter sections: 'Categories' with options like 'Solid Body Electric Guitars', 'Semi Hollow & Hollow Body', 'Electric Guitar Starter Packs', and 'Left Handed Electric Guitars'; and 'Brand' with checkboxes for 'Fender (353)', 'Gibson (239)', 'Schecter (180)', 'ESP (166)', and 'PRS (166)', plus a 'show more' link.

A retailer displaying dynamic filtering category options for a search of 'Electric guitar'

3. Cater to natural language phrases

Over 20% of all search terms are now recognised as long-tail phrases⁵ – consisting of 3 words or more. To improve the accuracy of site search it is vital that your search tool is capable of processing these complex queries. 80% of mobile visitors are likely to abandon a page if the user experience is not satisfactory⁶ and this includes ease of site search. But there are several ways retailers can accommodate searches that use natural language long-tail phrases.

Stemming

Stemming allows retailers to include past tense and plural variations of a search term to build up a category of keywords that would all return the same result. For example, a customer searching for a gold sequin top could refer to the product as 'gold sequin top', 'gold sequined top' or 'gold top with sequins'. An effective natural language search tool would be able to recognise that all three search terms are looking for the same thing and therefore requires the same set of results.

Synonyms

To cope with natural language search, site search can also be set up to understand search synonyms, in particular one-way synonyms. One-way synonyms allow retailers to widen or restrict search results depending on the specific term used. For example, a customer searching for 'cotton clothing' could be served with synonym categories 'cotton trousers', 'cotton t shirts' and 'cotton socks'. Yet, a search for the term 'cotton shirts' wouldn't be expected to return results from 'trousers' or 'socks'. An intelligent search tool would be able to understand the intent of the customer, and remove search results from any additional categories.

Include wider search terms

To accommodate the growth of natural language search phrases, retailers can widen keywords beyond traditional terms to include more colloquial attributes. These attributes can include specific product qualities such as 'fluffy', 'long-sleeved' and 'shiny' that wouldn't fit under regular search terms, but will match important customer criteria.

Fluffy Jumper

64 styles found | [View all](#)

The number of site search results from fashion retailer ASOS for natural language search term 'Fluffy Jumper'

For a tool to successfully cater to natural language phrases it needs to understand the actual meaning of the search, rather than simply looking for a keyword match, and recognise that a wide variety of search terms can all require the same search result. If your e-commerce business trades cross-border then multi-lingual site search can also be adopted to improve accuracy for each region, demonstrating a greater degree of localisation to help position a brand in a foreign market.

⁵ PCG Digital Marketing, 'Long-Tail Search Helps Us Google Naturally', December 2013

⁶ Limelight Networks, 'Stats Show How Critical the Mobile Experience is for E-Commerce', November 2011

4. Merchandise effectively

You may think that once a customer has entered their search query, there are few opportunities left for a retailer to influence customer buying decisions. But today's advanced site search solutions provide retailers with a comprehensive but easy to use set of merchandising tools at their fingertips, allowing them to control exactly which products are displayed for each search. As a result, ecommerce and online merchandising teams can create the most relevant selection of results to meet a customer's needs, as well as the wider demands of a retail business.

Refined algorithms and merchandising rules can be easily set up by an ecommerce team to influence the order of search results, as well as to draw attention to key products and even to create event-based search lists to serve seasonal search terms.

Boosting products

Along with control over featured products, new generation site search tools give retailers the ability to create separate sections within site search results to boost specific products using simple natural language queries.

If a retailer has a high level of stock for one particular product, a merchandiser can set this item to appear higher in search results than those with a lower stock volume. Likewise, an item which is currently on offer can be boosted through the creation of merchandising rules that will determine the product order of search results. Those that are currently on promotion can be programmed to appear at the top of the search results list, above stock that is still full price.

Promoted products

Promoted product functionality allows merchandisers to highlight relevant stock that would meet a customer query within a search page, such as a best-selling item, to increase the appeal. This tool can also be used to up-sell and cross-sell products which may be related to a search, but may not come directly under the main search query.

5. Optimise for mobile

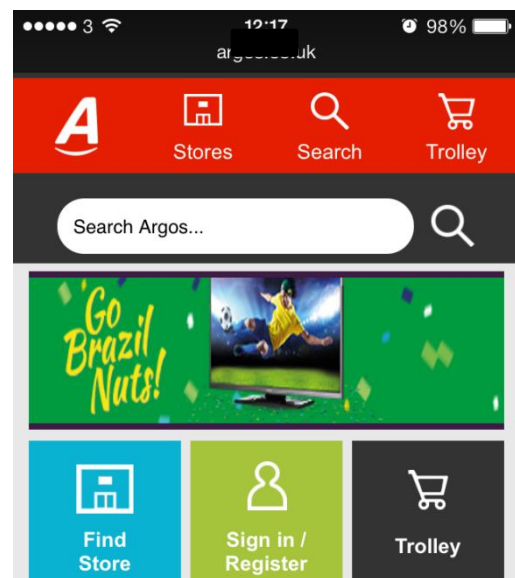
The changing dynamics of the consumer search environment has put mobile optimisation firmly at the forefront of ecommerce success in 2014, and retailers need to be prepared to capitalise on these new revenue opportunities. With the shift to mobile devices, traditional keyword solutions are no longer suitable to meet the needs of the multi-channel consumer.

Utilise voice recognition software

The growth of semantic search terms and natural language search is predicted to increase exponentially with the increasing popularity of voice recognition software, and is a natural progression for mobile users who are already well acquainted with Siri and Google Now. Intelligent site search tools can utilise the voice recognition software on mobiles and tablets to cater to these increasingly conversational search phrases.

Strip back your mobile UX

In most cases, mobile is the first point of entry to an e-commerce site search, making it vital that your tool is optimised to meet the unique demands of a mobile user. Take a pared back approach to your mobile operations. The search bar becomes an even more important tool for mobile visitors, so keep this clear and large, and located in a prominent position. Paired with simple, top-tier navigation categories, customers can use explicit search phrases to find their product of preference in as little time as possible.



Mobile site for retailer Argos, featuring a prominent search bar

3 out of 4 mobile searches result in a follow up action⁷ - be it a purchase, an enquiry or direct contact, and the better optimised your site is for mobile, the higher it will appear in search engine results pages. The key to satisfying mobile customers isn't really all that different from satisfying desktop or laptop visitors – they want to find products quickly, making the speed and accuracy of search results a priority, particularly when 61% of mobile site search users said they would exit a site if they couldn't find what they were looking for fast enough.⁸

⁷ ClickyMedia, 'UK Mobile Statistics', June 2013

⁸ Google Mobile Ads, 'Mobile-friendly sites turn visitors in customers', September 2012.

Delivering a Seamless Search Experience

Improved site search accuracy is ultimately all part of providing a seamless user experience for your customers, whether they are visiting you on mobile, tablet, laptop or desktop, and the benefits to retailers are very tangible.

A recent Econsultancy report⁹ conducted in 2013 found that visitors who utilised site search tools during their browsing time converted at 4.6% - a 1.9% increase compared to the website average of 2.7%. Whilst not a huge increase, the percentage of site search-assisted conversions actually accounted for 13.8% of all revenue generated over the study period.

The North Face reduce bounce rates by up to 50%

When implemented well, effective site search has also been proven to reduce bounce rates by up to 50%, as well as significantly increase conversion rates. Outdoor clothing retailer The North Face are one of the most recent retailers to have benefitted directly from adopting this sophisticated site search technology. The retailer implemented a best-of-breed tool to aid product discovery and facilitate natural language search internationally in 6 languages across 10 different countries.



Since introducing an advanced search tool on their European site, the brand has reported a 35% increase in search conversion rates, a 24% increase in revenue generated from site search and between a 30 to 50% reduction in bounce rates.¹⁰

Conclusion

The site search user has the potential to be a highly valuable customer; one that is proven to stay on site longer and convert at a significantly higher rate than any other visitor. As e-commerce and mobile technology continues to evolve to provide faster, more efficient online experiences, it is clear that site search has a very important role in play in any e-commerce operation, and the more advanced your tool, the better you can meet the needs of your customers.

⁹ Econsultancy, 'Four Reasons Why Site Search Is Vital For Online Retailers', November 2013

¹⁰ EasyAsk, 'The North Face Europe Uses EasyAsk for Magento to Allow E-Commerce Customers to Search Using Natural Language and Voice', March 2014



Leaders in intuitive website search, navigation and merchandising technology, the EasyAsk natural language search solution goes far beyond traditional search. Now, with the new EasyAsk eCommerce edition, you can have the best site search box in the industry, either as an on premise solution or Software as a Service (SaaS).

Our unique natural language search technology doesn't think in keywords - it can understand the true context of customer's long-tail and natural language search phrases to return a refined list of highly relevant and compelling product offers that will improve customer experience, lower bounce rates, and increase conversions.

EasyAsk has helped over 300 retailers across the globe to optimise their site search and improve their eCommerce operations, including The North Face, Samsonite, Andertons Music and True Value.

To find out how our advanced search tool can increase your online revenues visit www.easyask.com.

What next?

- Watch our [Search as you Type \(SayT\) demonstration video](#)
- View our webinar on [Doubling Customer Conversion Rates](#)
- Catch up with our [latest news](#)