

# Design It Right

Web site design for merchandising and conversion

**D**espite a challenging economy, online commerce remains a primary driver of growth for businesses. While improved Web site performance is an obvious target for most retailers, the path to achieve this goal is less clear. Online advertising, if successful, will drive qualified visitors, but traffic is only half the battle. The Web site must quickly establish high relevance to user needs, direct users to desired products and provide value and information to support the sale.

## Optimizing Cross-Channel User Experience

Today's Web customer lives in a multi-channel world where Web, catalog and store experiences overlap. This cross-channel experience is important to consider to ensure the Web site meets consumer needs and enhances brand experience. Leveraging cross-channel experience pays off: Online product research for expensive items can convert to large-ticket purchases offline while low-margin, everyday products can produce higher margins if sales are shifted to the Web. To the customer, it is one brand experience that is either positive or negative.

## Multiple Entry Points

Web design must consider a growing number of Web site entry points, each with unique opportunities for merchandising. Growing Web page counts can lead to a reliance on non-dynamic, sometimes "generic" feeling user experiences. To promote higher conversion rates, each main entry point should be evaluated for product display, copy and promotional opportunities. Web data provides the insight

needed to anticipate the user mind-set upon arriving at a page: How did they arrive at this page? Is the experience relevant, quickly engaging and encouraging the user to move further in the buying process?

The homepage is designed to be viewed by many people. Different users have different needs that must be quickly addressed with options presented through Web site navigation.

- Offering robust search tools with the ability to sort and narrow results by important criteria. Roughly 50 percent of Web users navigate directly to products through search or utilize dynamic navigation features to continue to refine products displayed.
- Providing quick access to critical tools such as search, "my account" information and customer service, as well as saved lists.

The screenshot shows the SeaBear website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links like 'Home', 'About Us', 'Contact Us', and 'FAQs'. Below that, a main banner features a 'Special Exposure to Shore' promotion. The central content area is titled 'Entertain Family & Friends' and includes a recipe for 'New! Alaskan King Crab Dip' with an image of the dish. To the left, there's a sidebar menu with categories like 'Wild Salmon', 'Halibut', 'Crab', 'Framing', 'Lobster', 'Tuna', 'Cod & Sole', 'Oysters & Mussels', 'Desserts', and 'Other Alaskan Foods'. The bottom of the page shows more product images and prices.

By merchandising products by lifestyle need, SeaBear was able to increase sales via smarter cross-selling. (For more examples of strong Web design approaches that have boosted ROI, visit the online version of this article at [www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/Web-site-design-merchandising-conversion-150036\\_1.html](http://www.targetmarketingmag.com/article/Web-site-design-merchandising-conversion-150036_1.html))

In addition to helping users find their way "to" a product, navigation must make it easy to find their way back to where they came "from."

Each main entry point must meet the needs of a broad audience at varying points in the buying cycle. On these pages, ease of use will be promoted by:

- Clearly organizing product and merchandising categories into a persistent navigational structure that allows users to go directly to a desired product or browse multiple items.

After restructuring its Web site to meet multiple user audience needs, specialty foods seller SeaBear saw visitor-to-buyer conversion rates rise to a peak of 28 percent with an average conversion of 21.1 percent for the holiday period. The Web site caters to both new and loyal users by focusing heavily on cross-selling, guiding users to finding the right item with search, restructured product categories and lifestyle-based merchandising. "Our bottom line has

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directly benefited from our new Web site," noted Mike Mondello, SeaBear's president. "Users are now guided to the right item for gift-giving, entertaining or healthy dining ..."

The growth of online ads, social networking, blogs and other consumer-generated content means an exponentially growing number of potential Web site entry points. These pages will be most successful by narrowing the number of products shown, focusing on best-selling items within the category of interest and associated promotions.

### The Buying Cycle

Successful Web sites support users at each phase of the buying cycle. Buying cycles vary from the quick purchasing of items such as books or toys to well-researched decisions for mattresses or engagement rings. Further, the needs of a first-time visitor may be vastly different from those of loyal customers who frequently interact with the Web site as well as store and catalog channels:

- **First-time visitors**, as well as those in the early stages of purchase research, will benefit from design that guides them in selecting the right product. Match products with lifestyle needs, showcase customer favorites and top-sellers, and allow users to narrow a group of items displayed. For more complex, well-researched purchases, selector tools help match user preferences to product recommendations.

Online sales grew by 47 percent at Fitter International ([www.fitter1.com](http://www.fitter1.com)) following a reorganization of its Web site navigation. Research found users were driven by lifestyle needs: shopping for products related to activity as well as by rehabilitation for specific injuries. The new Web site allows users to browse by activity and injury as well as by product category. In addition, YouTube videos were added to key product pages, providing more educational content and Web site entry points.

- **Repeat customers drive high conversion.** Retailers that have estab-

lished a high percentage of repeat buyers enjoy conversion rates as high as 5 percent to 15 percent versus the industry norm of 2 percent to 3 percent. Often, though, e-tailers fail to engage repeat customers as new products are introduced. To engage the repeat customer, display new product introductions in user-relevant categories, highlight promotions related to past purchases and include easy reorder through a "My Account" function.

Repeat and late purchase-cycle buyers are not shopping to browse; they are shopping to buy. The Web site must quickly address all questions regarding product use, benefits, care, shipping and promotional pricing. Links from pay-per-click ads and social networking sites should refer users to specific product, category or landing pages. Landing on a "general" entry page, like the homepage, will frustrate buyers who have already completed a large portion of their product purchase research elsewhere.

Visitors in the later stages of the buying cycle will benefit from cross-selling and upselling with intelligent recommendations, customer reviews and ratings, and well-placed promotions to confirm they have arrived at the best choice for the best price.

### Ongoing Design Enhancement

The best Web site design initiatives embrace performance enhancement as an ongoing process versus a one-time event. A/B or multivariate testing can be applied as well as the monitoring of key metrics such as sales, average order value and conversion rate. Establishing user panels enables regular user testing and user interviews, and elicits user feedback—all critical to gathering the insight you will need to keep your Web site design on track. ■

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