

## Navigation – the Key to e-Commerce

The rise and fall and rise again of e-commerce has led many of the former gurus to finally confess that they cannot predict the future course of web based business. While the once held notions that the Internet will render paper money obsolete have themselves become obsolete, there is no real argument against the claim that the Internet is a permanent and growing force in the world of retail.

The continual rise of e-commerce makes having a viable and professional web presence a necessity for retailers of all sizes. The science of selling on the web – just as there is a science to selling in brick and mortar – is based on a combination of being able to drive customers to the products they seek and driving impulsive buys. The challenge is meeting these needs in a way that makes for a pleasant and simple buy experience.

One of the key challenges for e-commerce websites is driving the consumer to the exact product he/she is looking for without minimizing the opportunity to also offer up an impulse by opportunity. Unlike traditional retail, where consumers pass products on the way to their mission purchase, the web delivers the consumer to the product page directly, without providing impulse options until later on in the buy chain. A full 25% of all purchases on the Internet are impulse buys, meaning that the need to make certain the impulse opportunities are presented is critical.

And the way to make sure impulse buys are presented is by making sure the mission product is presented because it is from the mission buy that the impulse options are determined.

The challenge is this; the website has the capacity to bring a consumer within seconds to the product he/she is seeking. This has led to a tremendous demand on the part of the consumer. The effort to meet this demand has led to the development of search functions and the presentation of product by categories. Each of these has their difficulties, as search engines could draw a “no results found” response (driving the buyer immediately from the website) and categories tend to be too broad and vaguely defined to allow one-click access to products.

So what is the key to getting the consumer to their mission product on a website while preserving the option to present impulse options? The answer is navigation.

Navigation is an integrated series of web functions that provide web shoppers with a comprehensive buying environment that enhances the experience and eases the ability for buyers to find and consider products of interest. The foundation of navigation includes the following functions:

- Browse
- Search
- User Tagging
- Personalization capabilities (like offer generation and shopper alerts)

The navigation platform, driven by software, should deliver the following advantages:

- Provides shoppers with a broad view of all available products

- Delivers access to product reviews and product relevant content
- Delivers product update information and personalized shopping alerts on special offers and promotions
- Provides the ability for shoppers to view related or accessory products to the product being viewed (sparking impulse buys)
- Tracks visitor path for the ability to generate and analyze data on user paths, product category efficiencies and buyer product review habits.

Simply stated, navigation is an e-commerce best practice that is currently neglected in favor of flash presentations, crowded homepages, and less than effective merchandising tactics. If the objective of the e-commerce site is sales (which obviously it is) then the task of transforming visitors to buyers is top priority.

Increasing the size of the average buy and the ability to encourage buyers to buy more is critical to the online store success, just as the need to provide a pleasant buying experience (because it determines the rate of repeat buyers) is critical.

All e-commerce sites – of companies small and large – need to delve into the software programs offering navigation suites. It is not only a competitive necessity for e-commerce sites; its ability to drive sales makes it an absolute necessity.