

# Improve Search Results with a Tune Up

**Even if you have a self-optimizing search delivery system, SEMphonic's president/chief technology officer suggests you follow this optimization guide.**

No part of a multi-product ecommerce site is more important than search. It is the tool of choice for the majority of visitors on retail sites. It is a vital part of both navigation and merchandising. It is the single most effective tool for making cash registers ring and for bringing a merry Christmas to an online store.

But while most marketers know how important search is, they often lack a good strategy for measuring and improving its performance. For many retailers who bought into optimized search systems, the thinking is that they can rely on the tool to optimize for them. And for most retailers, measuring search outcomes is devilishly difficult-- much harder than measuring the impact of most other pages/tools on the site.

The difficulty in measuring search stems from several aspects that are peculiar to it: Search is global on nearly all sites, search results can drive to any other navigation point on the site, search users as a whole form a distinct segment of visitors, and the search page is dynamically configured in essentially unknowable ways in response to both time and user query. These add up to a big headache for analysts trying to measure and optimize search performance.

But even if you have a self-optimizing search delivery system, you should be thinking about measuring and optimizing search-- just because it is so important. And while automated search systems can greatly improve search performance, they are not a fully plug-and-play solution.

In general, there are a few general ways to "tune" search. These include: identifying and fixing holes in the search system, custom optimization of part or all of the search results for key search terms, tuning of the rules for self-optimizing systems, optimization of the general search results template, leveraging search to the greatest extent possible by finding additional site integration opportunities, and identifying site and product opportunities by analyzing associated search patterns and search entry points.

## **Identifying and fixing holes in the search system**

Most web analytic solutions (and most internal search systems) will generate reports showing you the terms that have been searched on that didn't return any results. Ideally, no search term with any volume will ever show up here. But if it does, it means you have a hole in your site or your search that needs to be addressed. For retailers, pre-announced products are especially likely to create this problem.

## **Custom optimization of part of all of the search results for key term**

Self-optimizing tools are great at handling product selection from a large list. But they aren't self-tuning when it comes to the returned display. For many really important search terms on your site, you may want to customize all or part of the search results experience. Analogous to landing page customization in search engine marketing, this is a tuning strategy that can drive dramatically better results.

## **Tuning the rules of self-optimizing systems**

Systems that rely on popularity to conversion or revenue need human guidance to insure that they aren't mis-optimizing in many special cases. Once an optimizing system is in place, it can be highly self-reinforcing-- meaning that it can miss rapid shifts in merchandising patterns. Businesses whose product selection varies rapidly as key seasons approach may need to be especially sensitive to rule-tuning.

## **Optimization of the search results template**

This is an area more neglected outside the retail sphere than within it. But the search results page layout is the single most important page template on your site-- probably quite a bit more important and optimizable

than your home page. Just as a good web marketer will never stop trying to improve key landing pages, the search results template should be in constant test.

### **Leveraging search by finding integration opportunities**

Search is such a powerful conversion tool that it's surprising how many sites rely on the visitors to select it. What's more, as a visitor moves through your site, you're collecting valuable information that can help you tune search. By integrating search as a module on many pages, you can greatly increase the useful navigation options a visitor has at each touchpoint. In addition, clever use of search can essentially substitute for dynamic cross-sell engines-- providing real-time navigation paths to successful related products.

### **Identifying site and product opportunities**

When and how visitors search can provide numerous valuable clues to the web marketer. Tracking entry into search by page can help identify places (beyond the home page) where the visitor isn't finding an obvious navigation path. What's more, the set of search terms used in each page of the site can be revealing of what's not being addressed by content or what type of links might work well. Finally, most analytic tools will let you study subsequent search behavior-- the basket of terms searched after a particular search. This is a great way to refine what searchers of Product X aren't finding or care most about in your site literature.

Your search system is to your site what Christmas lists are to Santa-- the key to matching what people want with what they can get. And to have a really merry Christmas, it isn't enough to rely on your search tool to do all the heavy lifting for you. Even a great search tool can be seriously improved.