



# Patricia Seybold Group

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Trusted Advisors to Customer-Centric Executives

## **The Other Search**

Making the Most of Site Search to Optimize the  
Total Customer Experience

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*Sr. VP and Sr. Consultant, Patricia Seybold Group*

*Prepared for WebSideStory*

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# The Other Search

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## NETTING IT OUT

Effective site search can take you from high abandonment to full carts, one-hit visits to long eyeballs, or from a contact center deluge of nasty-grams to loyal customers. Internet search—the activity on Google and Yahoo!—delivers visitors to your door. Site search—that search box that should be a navigation choice you offer on every Web page—drives the customer's experience and triggers the delivery of your marketing messages for the duration of the visit.

Customer activity that begins on an Internet search engine doesn't end at the entry point to your site. You should sustain attention to visitors until they have either completed their objectives or abandoned them. Site search and the information it offers can help you determine how to surpass customer expectations and also reduce the number of frustrated visitors. The site search box itself is a tremendous gift to you from your customers: they are telling you exactly what they want, in their own words. They are inviting you to make your best offer. But in order to hear them, you need a plan for monitoring and managing the seeker experience.

Our 5-step plan provides the fundamentals for getting the most out of customer visits. We also provide KPIs and key metrics for your site and your seeker experience.

## It's Rude to Ignore Your Visitors

21<sup>st</sup> century marketing, at least so far, has been characterized by eagle-eyed focus on search engine marketing, online conversion, response rates, and call center deflection. At last companies are reaping the benefits of their Web investments, now that e-commerce sites are reliable, customers have come to appreciate the advantages of self-service, and search engine marketing is moving from art to science.

You probably know exactly what your click through rate is, what percent of your traffic comes from each Internet search engine, and what your search engine ad spend is. But the focus on the front-end elements of online marketing pushes other opportunities off our radar, and those opportunities represent significant bottom line potential.

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Once Internet search has brought a customer to your site, his next step will be using your site search box via search or navigation on your site. Are you watching what happens and making the most of his visit? Or does your interest in your customer end when he reaches your site?

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### *Potential of Great Site Search*

Internet search is a request to the World Wide Web for useful links. When we go to Yahoo.com or Google.com, we are performing an Internet search. Site search comes into play once we arrive at a site. A site search is performed when we type words into a site's search box and click "go."

Site search is one of your most valuable marketing resources. Internet search brings you traffic, but site search brings you sales. Internet search is outside your control: you can only indirectly influence your appearance in Internet search results and advertising. In contrast, you own your site search behavior and can control every aspect of the selection and presentation of results. You'd be crazy not to focus on how your site search drives your visitor conversion.

Great site search is the engine that drives your business. You don't have a search box on your site just to enter keywords—it also drives promotions and encourages cross-sells and up-sells. Most importantly, it gives you the most valuable artifact of the modern customer relationship: Site search tells you what your customers want, in their own words. There's a reason Google hangs on to billions of queries and governments want access to them. Site search queries are in themselves an invaluable resource.

Top e-commerce teams use site search data to:

- Identify products and services customers want, but aren't offered
- Identify products that are offered, but which customers can't find
- Identify trends, especially competitive trends
- Hone brand messages, leveraging customers' own words
- Identify emerging customer service issues
- Determine whether customers are provided enough information to reach their outcomes
- Make relevant offers, driving higher conversion and larger orders

What's the bottom line impact of great site search? The population of shoppers using site search on an e-commerce site spend 270 percent more, according to WebSideStory statistics from e-commerce sites.

Are you interested yet? Have we convinced you that site search is worth paying attention to?

Perhaps you're thinking that you don't need site search, because you have great navigation. In my experience, navigation works in theory, but not in practice. Navigation is a great way to find things, as long as you know where they are and what they are called. Most of the time, neither of those circumstances is true. I've watched people who created an entire knowledgebase and taxonomy unable to find a document they all remember recently reading. What hope do visitors have to divine your filing system? And why would you be willing to give up the insight derived from the unending stream of queries from your customers?

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### *Look Past Your Landing Page*

We propose that it's time to look more closely at the end-to-end experience for your customers, from Google on through to achieving their desired outcomes (and your bottom line goals).

Here are some data points that are just as important to you as click through:

- What are the top abandonment points in our customer experience?
- Are customers asking for things we don't have, or failing to find things we do have?
- What content, or content category, consistently drives further activity?
- What questions are so poorly answered that customers have to call us?
- How does conversion compare across product lines or categories?
- How many of your visitors choose site search first as the means to navigate your site?
- Does a new look or new navigation improve or degrade conversion?
- What kind of impressions are you getting for offers made on your site?
- What sorts of offers on your site get the best response?

We think you need reporting that gives you a coherent picture of customer response, from Internet search through lead generation, content consumption, purchase, or resolution. A performance dashboard that incorporates traffic and behavior from the first step on Yahoo! through the end of the visit to your site is the only way for executives to evaluate effectiveness of content, ad spend, and offers, while at the same time reflecting impacts on revenues and costs. You may be using a performance

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dashboard today—but are you including the information captured from your site search? If you aren't, you should be.

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### *Are We Getting the Most from Our Site?*

With the right level of investment in site search—both in technology and in using the goldmine of information it generates, you'll be able to both boost revenues and reduce costs.

With better information on customers, you'll make better offers and design more compelling content. You'll know immediately the impact site changes have on revenues. You'll know what keywords to advertise and how to word your ads and your offers for maximum effect. Customers on the receiving end of a better experience—where it's easy to find what they need—are willing to spend a little more time, buy a little more, or learn a little more. The more they invest in the relationship, the more they value the relationship.

With better site search, customers find what they need and don't need to call (which online customers generally hate to do). With comprehensive site search statistics, you'll know what questions don't connect with good answers, what content needs to be developed, and what content should be abandoned due to lack of interest.

How can you tell if you are under-invested in site search? If any of the following is not true for your site, you are underinvested:

( ✓ Check if True)

- Product marketing demands site search statistics daily, to maximize their effectiveness.
- Customers are responding to offers triggered by site search terms at optimal points in their visits.
- Marketing staff review site search reports in choosing keywords Internet ad spend, email campaign wording, and offers.
- Marketing staff know what content captures attention and which links are most compelling.
- Customer support uses site search statistics to identify content that is needed and to improve site search results.

If you didn't check "true" for each of the above statements, you are probably underinvested in site search.

## Great Marketing = Great Customer Experience

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Site search and navigation drive the customer's experience, and therefore, they also trigger all the marketing messages that are delivered on your site. It is the glue that cements the relationship between the brand and the customer, one of your top marketing resources.

From your viewpoint, great marketing brings customers to your site, and then maximizes the value of each visit in generating leads, selling goods, solving problems, or presenting premium content and ad impressions.

From the customer's viewpoint, the ideal is to land on your site and find what he needs in 2-3 clicks. There is an obvious and very direct link on your home page, or his first site search delivers what he needs. He is presented at every step with compelling offers that help him reach his goal. The entire experience is so streamlined and engaging at the same time that he has the leisure and the interest level to pursue some secondary objectives during this visit.

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### *Great Site Search-Driven Marketing at Backcountry.com*

If this ideal were as effortless to deliver as it were to experience, all sites would be great sites. But there is considerable effort invested in creating this oh-so-seamless customer experience. Backcountry.com, a specialty retailer in technical outdoor sporting equipment, delivers an outstanding online customer experience and maximizes the capabilities of site search in guiding the shopping experience. Customers can quickly find an item for which they are looking or explore a new outdoor sport and all of its gear. Here is some of what Backcountry.com does right:

- Home page presents all major product categories and sub categories for instant navigation
- Site search box on every page that invites detailed searches
- Cross-sell promotional bundles driven by site search for any of the items in the bundle
- Site search that offers a guided experience, allowing the visitor to refine their search on the fly by relevant criteria—e.g., brand, price, color, etc.
- Featured products in each category
- Featured brands in each category
- Bestsellers in each category
- Sale items

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- Minimizes “no results” by offering related products, or products from affiliated sister-brand Web sites
- Invitation on all pages to join affiliates program, sign up for a catalog or email newsletter, read the Backcountry blog, or link to informational sites

See Illustration 1.

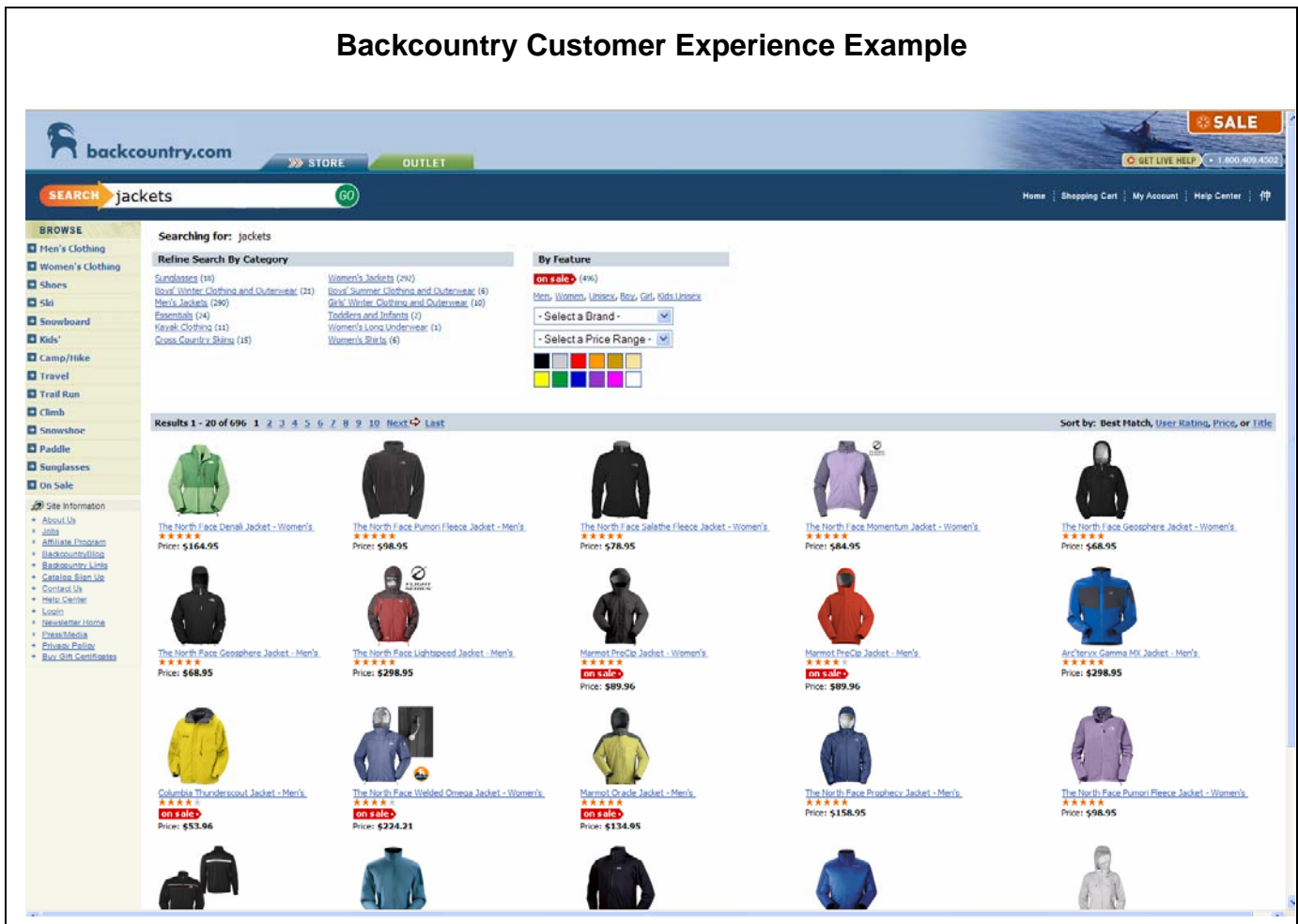


Illustration 1. When you a search for “jacket,” you get search results that offer not only a range of jackets in a thumbnail results display, but also give searchers the option to narrow their selection by color, price, or category (men’s, women’s, girl’s, boy’s, etc). To keep customers from feeling lost, search results are navigable, which lets seekers browse the selection, much like they would in an offline store.

## 5-Step Plan to Boost your Results

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Now that you've seen the potential of site search, and the ideal of what great site search can do for your customer experience, here's some practical advice on how to get the most out of your site.

### *Step 1: Baseline Current Performance and Offers*

First, assess the performance of your site, and your capabilities. Key to your assessment are the following:

**CONVERSION RATES.** Assess conversion rates at each key step of the customer experience, including from Internet search engine to landing page; landing page to detailed content; site search results to detailed content; content to cart and cart to purchase (if it's an e-commerce site); content to additional content; content to registration (if it's a lead generation site); and other conversions important to your situation.

**QUALITY OF SITE SEARCH.** Starting with the most frequently used search queries, assess the quality of site search results indicated by rate of successive site searches, rate of site searches without conversion to detail page, number of "no results" searches and the associated failed keywords, and the rate of requests for contact information.

**PROMOTIONS.** Assess promotion impressions, offer impressions, and conversion rates for offers and promotions. Also, review current offers on your site, in light of customer objectives. Do the offers support customer objectives or get in the way? Evaluate your top converting keywords and top search terms for related promotions, cross-sell, or up-sell opportunities.

**REVIEW STAFFING AND RESPONSIBILITIES.** In order to deliver a great customer experience, effective offers, useful information, and self-resolution, you need staff responsible and available for actively monitoring seeker experience. If customers do not easily and quickly get great information and great offers as part of their site search experience, it is the advocate's responsibility to negotiate improvements. You'll also need people who are responsible for the quality and findability of key information collections, such as products, technical support, and top content. If your visitors are getting "no results" when searching, someone should understand why and make the appropriate changes in a timely manner. Delay can mean a frustrating visitor experience, a missed opportunity, and potentially a lost customer.

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### *Step 2: Cross-Pollinate Internet and Site Search*

Visitors and prospective visitors have certain words in their heads that they think describe what they are looking for. In order to start your ad spending on Internet search, you've already made your own assessment of what those important words are. But our own experience tells us that people (including ourselves) don't always know the right terminology. This is why the words "thingy" and "whatchamacallit" were invented. One of the fabulous benefits of site search reporting is that you can see the words used by people who made it to your site. You can see the items viewed by those people. In short, you can find all the additional words you should be advertising, based on real people's behavior.

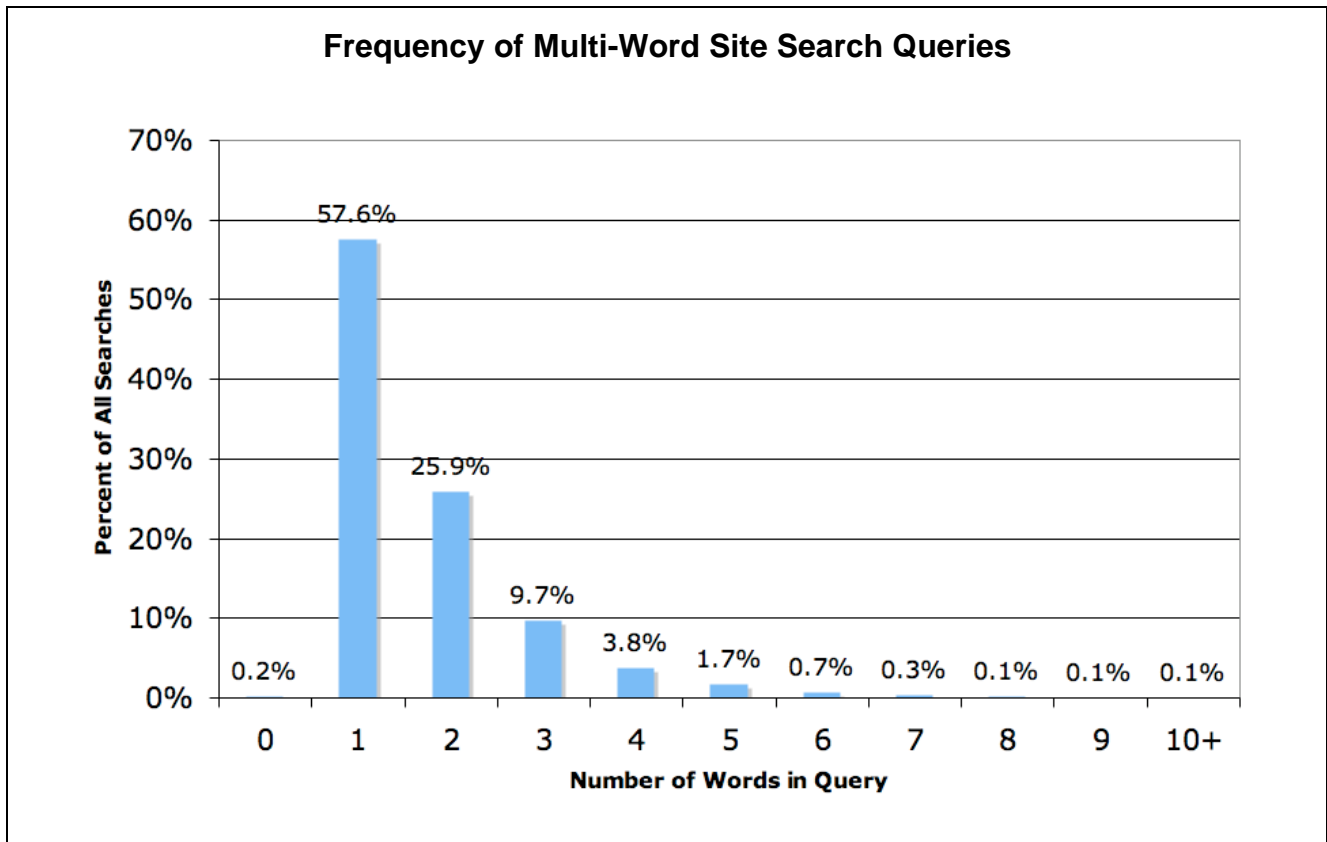
It would be wonderful if this were completely automated, and with some effort, you can get there. But at first we recommend that you review the site search terms that are used by your visitors and see if there are any that should be added to your Internet campaigns.

What will those site search terms look like? They will probably be one or two words. WebSideStory studied visitor site search behavior on 42 of its customers' Web sites in May 2006. Fifteen of these sites were commerce sites, 13 were lead generation sites, and 14 were media sites. Over 34 million site searches were analyzed. The key findings:

- One and two word queries comprised 83% of all site searches. Among commerce sites, this measure was 91%.
- The top 4% of all unique query phrases comprised 50% of all site searches. For commerce sites in the study, 2% of all unique query phrases comprised 50% of all site searches.
- Nearly 12% of all site searches led to zero results. Among commerce sites, this value was 8.5%.
- About 0.2% of all site searches were blank.

See Illustration 2.

It's pretty clear that visitors choose to be economical with their search efforts. They know from Internet search engines, such as Google, that choosing one or two words can lead them down the right path. They have learned from site search experiences that too many words in a query will be less effective, and so, they choose a small number of words. The greatest return on investment is made by optimizing what typical users do, which is addressing queries with just a few words.

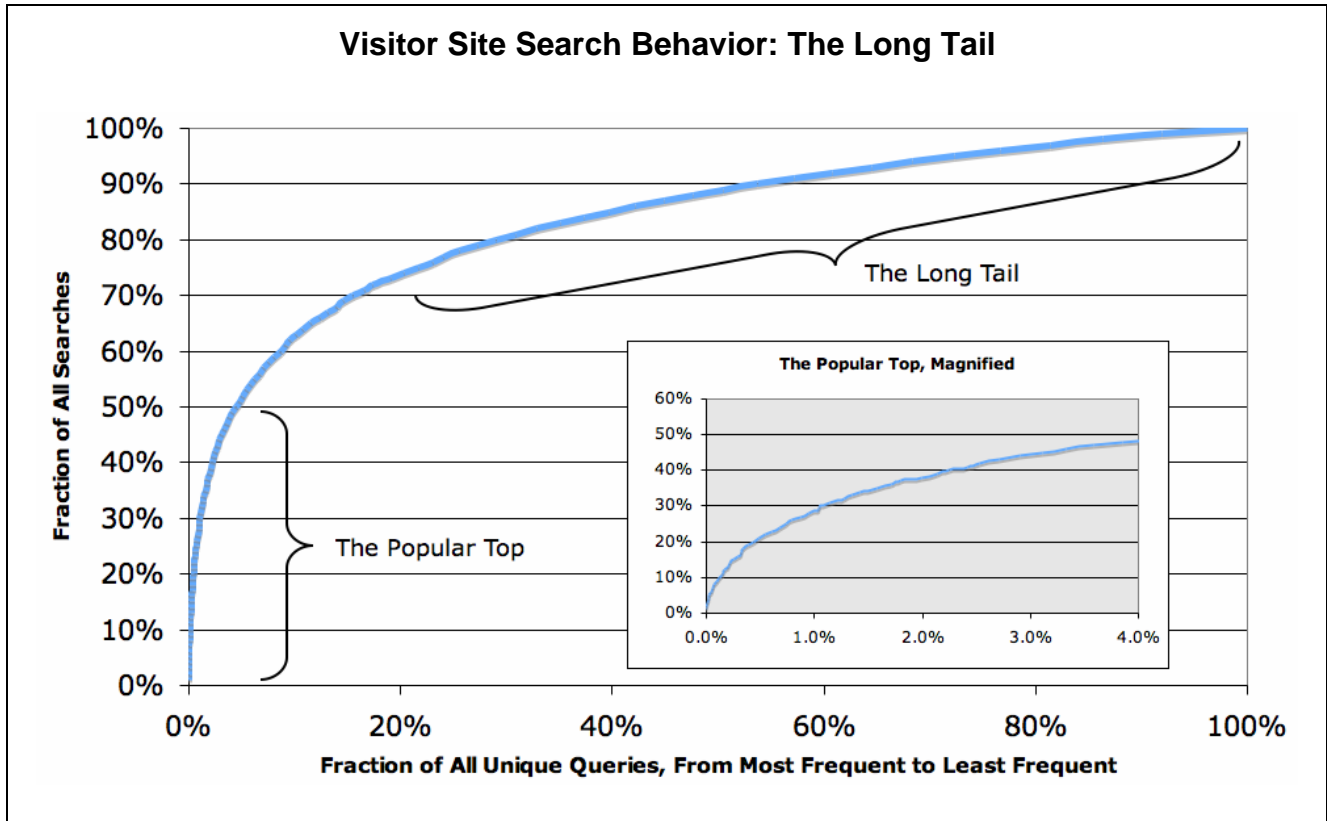


*Illustration 2. This graph shows the nature of the queries across the sites. Zero word queries comprise a minor amount of queries and are caused by visitors clicking the button that initiates a site search. One and two word queries comprised 83% of the site searches. Among commerce sites, this number was 91%.*

### *Step 3: Monitor Site Search Traffic Daily—and React*

The best run Web sites are supported by a team of people (sometimes a very small team) that reviews yesterday’s site search analytics data. Here’s what they look at:

**MOST POPULAR SITE SEARCHES AND NAVIGATIONS.** The top few hundred site searches represent opportunities to make high-imperson offers of content, products and services, because they typically comprise a large fraction of all searches on your site. Each of those top site searches should trigger a great offer. By looking at what people select, you’ll know what your top content is—and you should make sure it’s offered on other pages. One easy way to do this is via a “What’s Hot” list or image on each page. A premium site search engine makes it easy to trigger offers based on navigation steps or site searches by setting business rules. For example, “If customer searches for skis or navigates to the ski category, present the special on ski parkas.” Or, “If the customer clicks the biology tab, present the most article most viewed in the past 24 hours, then show the article most viewed in the last hour.”



*Illustration 3. This graph represents the results of a WebSideStory study of 34 million searches: a small number of site search terms are used repeatedly, driving a large percentage of the site searches. A very large number of site search terms are used only once, creating a graph known as the Long Tail.*

How many of those top searches are there? In Illustration 3, which presents more results of the WebSideStory study, we see that the top 4% of all queries accounted for approximately 50% of all site searches. This range of visitor behavior is called “The Popular Top,” because it represents the most popular queries used on the site. Among the commerce sites in the study, the concentration of queries among “The Popular Top” was even more pronounced. The top 2% of all queries accounted for 50% of all site searches.

At the other end, “The Long Tail” represents individual queries that are the least popular. Many of these queries are used once and only once on a site. Throughout the study, approximately 60% of all unique queries are used once and only once on a site during the study period, and those unpopular queries comprised about 20% of all site searches—a relatively small fraction.

This data demonstrates that you have opportunities to influence your visitors outside of the navigation experience. Think about how much time you spend creating and implementing your navigational structure and about the results of that effort. This data tells us that you can get significant results by spending time on optimizing your site search results.

The top site searches and navigation paths also represent an obligation. Someone on your staff is responsible to make sure that the items people actually click on are showing up near the top of the list of items on the page, or even better, your site search engine should employ this data automatically from your analytics system. Your site search engine should make it easy to boost individual items or set rules for pushing the most popular items to the top of the list. Your customer service staff should be making sure that the top site searches, as well as the most common contact topics, have great answers. You probably don't have time to make sure every query has a great answer, but you must make sure that the most common queries do—both for customer satisfaction and for cost control.

**SITE SEARCHES WITH POOR RESULTS.** It pays to look at these site searches and make sure that your dictionary reflects customer's terminology and any egregious misspellings that even automated correction can't fix. In the customer service realm, site searches with poor results will trigger a phone call or email, so you want to make sure that if an answer exists it will in the future be presented, and if no answer exists, you might want to author one. In the commerce realm, site searches with no results might indicate an opportunity to broaden your assortment, or they might indicate that a competitor has a new offering and your customers want to know what you have that is similar.

**MOST POPULAR CONTENT.** The most popular content presents the same opportunity as the top site searches. Peg great offers to your most popular content and offer your most popular content on other pages. In the customer service realm, consider the most popular content within a topic: of course it makes no sense to show nail gun users how to clean a paint sprayer. But you might want to offer a special on nails next to the article on how to clean a nail gun.

**LEAST VIEWED CONTENT.** Get it out of the way! The worst situation is having the least viewed content consistently shows up in the top 3 results. Fix the content or the boosts and metadata that put it at the top. You may consider eliminating content that is seldom or never viewed, because it is expensive to maintain.

**OFFERS AND CONVERSION.** By reviewing the most and least viewed offers, along with which offers have the highest and lowest conversion rates, you'll know what offers are being presented and how customers are responding to them.

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### *Step 4: Test Impact of Changes*

Every change that is made to site search should be tested for its impact on your site's KPIs. What may seem trivial, such as changing the color or placement of a "register now" or "buy now" button, could have dramatic impact on results. Ideally, you'd use multivariate testing to compare results for current vs. new designs of site search, to measure the impact. You wouldn't launch a new navigation scheme or a new home page without testing... so why would you launch new site search features and functionality without subjecting it to the same rigorous quality and testing control?

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### *Step 5: Track Site KPIs*

There are a small number of Key Performance Indicators (KPI) that enable you to monitor site effectiveness as it relates to site search. These site-search-related KPIs should be monitored in conjunction with your larger Web site KPIs, and include:

- Site search conversion rate
- # of failed searches
- Top search terms
- Failed search terms
- Unique site search queries as a percentage of total queries

Site search KPIs should be very clearly linked to the broader company KPIs. Many companies measure page views per visit, in part because it is easy to measure and gives some feel for the amount of traffic. In order for site search conversion rate to be a useful KPI, for example, it must tie directly to a company goal for revenue, leads, subscribers, call deflection, customer satisfaction, or customer loyalty. Without that tie, the number merely conveys the workload of your site search technology.

## Measuring Site Effectiveness

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### *Incorporate Site Search with Key Metrics*

Management always starts with measurement. It's important to position all your assets and operations against corporate goals, and your Web site is certainly one of your leading assets. We've already explained that site search KPIs should be a subset of company KPIs that you monitor and should reflect the goals of the site. Whether your site delivers content, sells products, establishes relationships, or provides support, your site effectiveness assessment should measure how well the site delivers what matters to customers, how well the site supports the site goals, and how well the site supports company goals (KPIs).

Table A presents our starter kit for site metrics, a guide for how to incorporate your Web asset into your operations metrics and relate Web results directly to corporate goals. For that reason the table begins with company goals and performance, and then looks at its customer goals and delivery against those goals. It incorporates site search KPIs into the larger Web site KPIs for a complete view. Not everything we'd like to know can be measured directly. You can't expect your customers to tell you whether they found what they were looking for. They'll tell you sometimes, but not always. So we can suggest some indirect measurements that will help you track whether your site is getting better or worse. For example, knowing how many site searches occur for every item on which it is clicked is an indicator of how much floundering around your customers are doing.

Site Effectiveness Metrics				
Company Goal	Site Goal	Goal Performance	Customer's Goals	Customer Performance
Customer Growth; Impressions	Content Delivery (Media Site)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visits per day</li> <li>• Articles viewed per day</li> <li>• % of Customers visiting weekly</li> </ul>	Quickly gather latest news; stay informed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of Articles viewed per customer per month</li> <li>• % of Site searches where no results were selected</li> <li>• # of Site searches per article viewed</li> </ul>
Revenue	Revenue	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Site revenues</li> <li>• # of Orders</li> <li>• Average order size</li> <li>• Conversion rates at each step, from Internet search through order commit</li> </ul>	Efficiently make the best choice, and include everything needed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elapsed time to place an order</li> <li>• Return rate</li> <li>• # of Calls to customer service because shipment is incomplete (in customer's eyes)</li> <li>• # of Site searches per item purchased</li> </ul>
Customer Growth	Lead Generation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of Leads</li> <li>• Conversion rate</li> </ul>	Identify company with which to enter a relationship, and establish contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elapsed time to understand the company and its services</li> <li>• Confidence in the company</li> <li>• # of Clicks to establish contact</li> </ul>
Customer Loyalty; Cost to Serve	Customer Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of Questions answered (or problems resolved)</li> <li>• # of Views of "contact us" information (if not provided on every page)</li> <li>• # of Cases where customer first attempted resolution online</li> <li>• # of Cases brought to contact center that could have been resolved online</li> </ul>	<p>Efficiently identify resolution</p> <p>Understand how to avoid problem in the the future</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• # of Site searches per document opened</li> <li>• % of Resolutions during first contact</li> <li>• % of Customer feedback polls indicating success</li> </ul>

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*Table A. This table presents our recommendations for site metrics. The table starts with company goals, which are then translated to site goals. The site goals are then measured via the entries in the Goal Performance column. Then we look at the customer's goals, and finally, what you can measure to estimate whether the customer goals are being achieved.*

### Conclusion

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Our 5 Step plan will produce valuable results—in particular, a boost to profits and an improved customer experience. The steps are somewhat challenging, but today’s premium site search technologies can ease the journey. Here are the technology requirements that a site search engine should address:

- Navigation and site search work together seamlessly
- Site search results are always organized for navigation via attributes that make sense to customers
- Dynamic navigation within site search is available, allowing successive refinement based on attributes specific to the group of items (sweaters have color and style, bolts have diameter and head type)
- Offers and promotions can be triggered by site search keywords and navigation choices
- Items can be boosted to the top of results for specific categories of content
- Business rules control how content is selected, for example, the top content of the day is always presented under the “What’s Hot” heading
- Visitor spelling can be automatically corrected by the site search engine without requiring staff to identify potential misspellings
- Multivariate testing, to assess two or more versions of a page or offer
- Testing improvements or changes to the search experience, just as you would other portions of your Web site
- Reporting on all conversions, including site search, step-by-step and end-to-end
- Reporting on site search activity, including most popular site searches, site searches with worst results, and rate at which promotions or offers presented
- Including site search KPIs as part of the total company KPIs and measuring against KPI goals

This is a challenging list: we urge you not to consider building it yourself. Not even the Fortune 5 have taken that tack. The vendor you select should of course address the technology requirements, but should also provide a credible plan for achieving results. The plan should deliver improvements in the first weeks of production, which should be within a few months of your start. Your risk will be significantly reduced, and your results significantly boosted, by expert advice and guidance not only during technology implementation but also through the succeeding years. Your customers, your market, your content and your staff will change over time. You need experts to

turn to who will make sure you continue to be successful. One final note. Given there is value in delivering great site search, you want to reduce delay in reaping the benefits. Hosted services significantly streamline the process. The hosted approach bypasses capital budgeting and the tasks of implementing and maintaining software. It gives you the opportunity to have the experts manage your site search experience while you focus on the primary business goals of your Web site.