Keeping Content Consistent

Walmart unifies product descriptions and information

by CRAIG GUILLOT

Major retailers sell hundreds of thousands, even millions, of products on their websites, and it can be difficult to maintain consistency across product descriptions. With nearly 7 million products on its website and new items being added daily, Walmart is no different.

Today's consumers, heavily engaged in online comparison shopping, rely on descriptions, reviews, specifications and other content to chose both products and the retailers they'll purchase from. Well-written, accurate descriptions are critical — consumers need the right information to make an informed purchasing decision without seeing the product. Poorly written, incomplete or inaccurate descriptions can easily lead to unsatisfied custom-
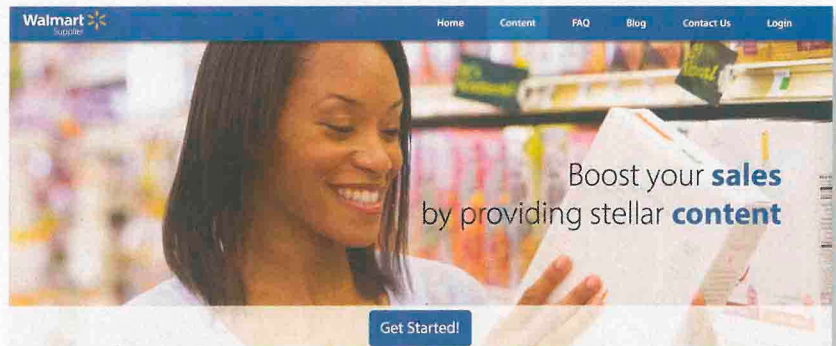
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> — Ram Rampalli, WalmartLabs

ers and bad reviews that can impact retailers, suppliers and manufacturers.

Walmart's product content collection system was designed to make content at Walmart.com consistent and effective. Ram Rampalli, global head of content acquisition for WalmartLabs, a Walmart division dedicated to e-commerce research and innovation, says high-quality data is often underestimated as a critical part of the selling equation. There's a strong need to improve "consistent vocabulary" between the mobile, web and in-store experiences — not just the way the copy is written, but ensuring products are properly classified and presented with the right specifications to allow shoppers to make good comparisons.

"High-quality product data is the foundation of everything in the [omnichannel experience]," Rampalli says. "The crux of the ... project is going to be creating this rich and stable product content."

Rohit Deep, senior director of engineering for WalmartLabs, is responsible for cataloging and setting up marketplaces. He says there can some-times be a disconnect between suppliers and end users in e-commerce, and the information collected is being used to power many capabilities for Walmart's e-commerce experience.

Most of the retailer's suppliers, such as Mondelez International, Combe Inc. and Step2, focus on delivering their information on the product

Boost your **sales** by providing stellar **content**

Get Started!

The Key to e-Commerce is Good Data. Here's Why.

Search visibility
Having relevant data helps boost your products' search results and reach the customers most interested in your products.

Increase conversions
Customers are more likely to purchase your products if they have more details about them. Help them make an informed decision.
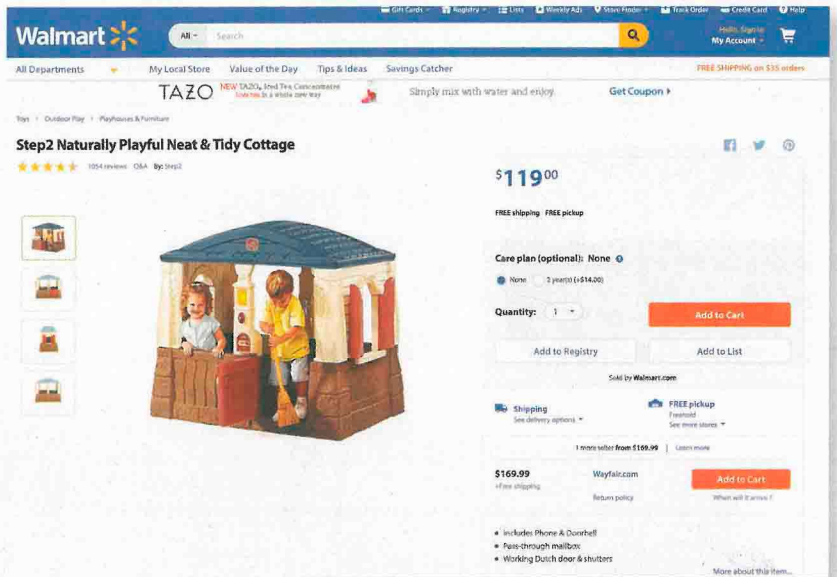
Accurate data
Product descriptors and other details about the product help customers fully understand what your product is all about.

Expand your audience
Over 200 million customers visit Walmart.com every month - and many of them are looking for just the product you're marketing.

Step2 Naturally Playful Neat & Tidy Cottage

$119.00

packaging for consumers to view in stores. While this may suffice for a bricks-and-mortar environment, it doesn't always translate in the digital world. Deep says product information must be specifically tailored and optimized for the digital experience, especially for comparison shopping.

GATHERING INFORMATION

One of the challenges they initially found was that few suppliers had data management systems beyond internal IT departments. Deep says Walmart works on building content from the supplier's information and point of view because the supplier is typically best positioned to market the product.

Because the old way involved gathering a mix of information from manufacturers, distributors and third-party sources, it often led to inaccuracies and inconsistent descriptions. Deep says WalmartLabs has enticed suppliers to participate in the process by presenting it as an opportunity to help market their products to consumers.

"The more high-quality content the [supplier] provides, the better e-commerce features we can provide to our customers that help them locate products much faster," he says. "It's a benefit for retailers and suppliers."

The product content collection system minimizes inaccuracies by obtaining all information directly from the supplier. To maintain consistency and ensure it's getting the right information, WalmartLabs has created a comprehensive list of clearly defined attributes needed for each category.

WalmartLabs has detailed attribute guidelines to ensure each product and supplier is providing the right information. Rampalli says suppliers can also input optional information and content that is unique to the product.

"We have things that are common

to [all products] but we're also not forcing them to conform to one specific format and lose their individuality or focus on the product. There is flexibility," he says.

Walmart is encouraging suppliers to submit product content for their entire catalogs, not just products carried in the Walmart system. Even suppliers who don't sell at Walmart are invited to participate and submit content. The transparency is partly designed to help the retailer take on a product content aggregator role.

For liability reasons, Walmart doesn't change any data received from the supplier or content provider. Walmart takes care to ensure the accuracy of the data and uses a scorecard system to rate suppliers on how they're delivering information. As the content system is

in the early phases of its deployment, feedback from WalmartLabs helps suppliers learn if they're hitting the mark with their content.

Rampalli says there's also ongoing communication about the importance of accurate data and how it can impact the sales process.

PHASED INCLUSION

Deep says that when it started selling products online, Walmart quickly realized that content was a critical piece of the sales puzzle. After years of research, it started a pilot program for the product content collection system and has been expanding it in phases. The new content system will offer benefits for suppliers and for Walmart, which will be able to offer a better selection of products and confirm that those products are being properly marketed and represented.

Deep says Walmart is "moving through the catalog" and regularly adding new segments and products to the database. Now that it has a solid system and infrastructure in place

to add content, Walmart is allowing suppliers to have a greater voice in the conversation. He says many are already coming to the table with solid content they've developed for their own e-commerce sites; others need more careful guidance and direction in optimizing product descriptions.

"The effort is about more standardization and pushing it out to suppliers, giving them an open channel to work with and provide the content," he says. "It's an [ongoing] process and a continuous evolution."

The system also provides an infrastructure to occasionally update descriptions and re-categorize products where necessary, says Rampalli. For example, tablets were simply classified under "computers" years ago. As the number and prominence of tablets

grew on the market, they eventually became their own category, and also expanded into sub-categories like "kids' tablets," "tablets under $75" and "Apple iPads."

He says proper categorization, as well as updated relations to complementary and accessory products, can better help consumers find what they're looking for. The adaptability of the system is designed to maintain standardization and consistency, and products and categories go through evolutions.

Rampalli says Walmart has had a very positive response from suppliers, many of which are "trying to get ahead of the game" and submit solid content.

"Everybody understands that this is the future and that having all this high-quality product data is essential in the omnichannel world," he says. **STORES**

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