



Give shoppers what they want

By Katie Evans and James Melton

If a retailer wants to sell a lot of goods online, having a nice-looking website is an advantage, as it's the best way to show off products and give consumers the impression the retailer is legitimate. But when it comes to closing that sale it's vital that retailers make a site easy to navigate and products easy to find regardless of what device the consumer uses.

According to an Internet Retailer consumer survey of 254 consumers conducted in October, nearly 66% of respondents say the "look and feel" of a website has an impact on whether they complete a purchase. But, when asked what they consider to be the most

important design feature on any online shopping site, more than 72% say they want a site that makes it easy for them to find what they want. For mobile sites, that percentage tops 75%.

It sounds simple, but with increasing shopper demands and the dizzying array of screen sizes and connection speeds available, giving shoppers all they want on a retail site isn't easy. Fortunately, there are technologies that merchants can use to aid shoppers in their journey to buy.

Technologies such as artificial intelligence and dynamic personalization are showing positive early results when deployed by online retailers.



Retailers use advanced technologies in web and mobile web design to master the basics of understanding what makes shoppers (and sales) tick.

Meanwhile, mobile design techniques that improve upon the older, original form of responsive design are making mobile shopping less frustrating for consumers and more lucrative for merchants.

U.K.-based toy retailer **The Entertainer**

began using vendor SmartFocus to personalize the home page of TheToyShop.com based on what the retailer knew about each visitor about 18 months ago, says Rob Wood, The Entertainer's head of online. It also used SmartFocus to enable it to personalize the three weekly emails it sends to its list of about 1 million shoppers.

The Entertainer set up about 12 brand or topic categories such as Star Wars or Legos. It then sent targeted emails to consumers who have shown they may like one of the brand topics. The targeted emails, for example, might recommend a new product from Star Wars or announce a promotion related to the item. In addition to sending the shopper a targeted email, the SmartFocus system can recognize a shopper and her interests either via a cookie or the link she clicked in an email to navigate to the site. The vendor and retailer can then change the top banners on the home page to display relevant brands and products.

For example, if the retailer's home page is focused on its Penny Sale where shoppers can buy one item and get a second for a penny, but it recognizes a Star Wars fan, it includes a Star Wars banner at the top of the home page, Wood says. The Entertainer created banners for each of the dozen brand categories it also uses for email segmentation, Wood says.

Since using SmartFocus, mobile sales have grown 120% and repeat shoppers are up 60%, Wood says.

The site's average order value also has "significantly increased," Wood adds.

Lounge apparel retailer **FlyPolar Clothing**, meanwhile, is finding that using

artificial intelligence in web design can lead to real sales increases—and fast ones, too. The web-only merchant had hit a sales downturn, generating about \$50,000 in July 2016 down from about \$277,000 in web sales in February 2015, says Shawn Broadus, the retailer's founder and CEO.

"We hit a slump," Broadus says. "The seasons changed and our conversion rates dropped." Broadus reached out to Condorly LLC, a vendor among a growing breed of service providers that sell conversion rate optimization services that aim to figure out ways to get more shoppers to purchase.

To boost conversions, Condorly CEO Peter Brown and Broadus turned to new user testing software from San Francisco-based Sentient Technologies that uses artificial intelligence to enable companies to test a vast number of elements across multiple pages at once to determine the arrangement that works best.

The AI-based software, called Sentient Ascend, was being used by about 10 mainly e-commerce companies as of September, says Jon Epstein, chief marketing officer for Sentient.

In the first 30 days after implementing the AI software with ShopFlyPolar.com, the site's average order value increased about 13% and the retailer experienced a 16% increase in site visitors initiating the checkout process. The conversion rate also climbed to as high as 1.84% in the first month compared with its 2016 previous high of 0.89%, Broadus says.

The big difference between Sentient Ascend and traditional user testing services is Sentient's ability to simultaneously test multiple moving parts. The standard testing method most retailers use is A/B testing, designing two versions of the same page, showing them to users, and collecting data on how well each version converts. This method incorporates human knowledge or hypotheses about what design tweaks will improve performance and then tests the effects. After observing the results, a retailer can compare the designs. However, a merchant can only examine a fraction of page designs with A/B testing, and it may completely miss subtle interactions in the design—how a light green Add to Cart button, for example, performs when paired with a particular font size and style.

The Ascend AI-based software automatically generates web pages to be tested based on the goals and ideas marketers input. For example, a retailer might enter a goal of higher average order value and then input the various ideas on page tweaks to reach that goal.

The variables can be anything on a site, Sentient says, from such small changes as button color and font weight to entirely revamped messaging and design ideas. The variables a retailer tests may also be on a single page or across multiple pages of a website—something Sentient says is not possible with other tools on the market. The software then searches for the most successful ideas across the massive amount of possible combinations its users want to try.

As Ascend tests and observes results, it learns and evolves combinations of the design variations. During the testing process, it directs traffic to the best-performing design. The result is being able to test thousands of page designs in a short time.

For example, the system helped FlyPolar opt to change where it lets customers delete an item from an order, moving it further along in the checkout process. That “remove” option used to be the second part of checkout, and FlyPolar moved it to the end of the transaction.

“We were offering an end to the customer journey right away,” Brown says. “Now we are pulling them further into the sales funnel.” FlyPolar also focused heavily on product pages in its testing. On those pages a simple move like putting the Buy button above the fold helped pages perform better.

While new technologies attract ample buzz, sometimes traditional, proven approaches to web and mobile web design work well. That includes talking to your customers and asking them what they want.

That's what jewelry e-retailer Whiteflash Inc. did at the start of its 18-monthlong project to revamp its mobile and

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desktop sites. Whiteflash for years had operated separate desktop and mobile sites, but as mobile traffic steadily increased, it received a slew of feedback from consumers that its mobile site was not very functional, says Brian Boyne, vice president of Whiteflash.

So it set out to redesign its site using responsive design principles. Responsive design is a design technique that adapts the look of a retail website to the device the consumer is using. It uses one code base, meaning retailers don't have to operate several sites to account for the many types of screens consumers use to access the internet.

Of the retailers listed in Internet Retailer's 2016 Mobile 500 ranking of the leading global mobile commerce competitors across the United States, Europe, Latin America and Asia, 357 use responsive design, a major jump from just 127 retailers a year earlier.

Before embarking on the redesign, Whiteflash selected 30 customers who had previously given feedback to work with Whiteflash throughout development. Those shoppers tested versions of the site and suggested improvements, says Eliezer Eber, chief operating officer at Whiteflash. For example, customer input prompted the retailer to include a drop-down menu that allows shoppers to select a currency. Previously, Whiteflash wanted to put as much information as possible on its website, which does not translate well to the small screens of mobile devices, Eber says. The website now does more linking to information instead of putting it all in front of the consumer at once, he says.

Whiteflash's key improvement was to its checkout page, Eber says. Previously, the website had three pages as part of the checkout process—shopping cart, payment information and confirmation. The retailer merged those steps into one page with the goal of decreasing cart abandonment and keeping shoppers from hitting the back button and losing the information they already entered, Eber says. The checkout page also updates the input fields as needed. For example, a shopper can choose to pay via a wire transfer or credit card, and Whiteflash will not show inputs for credit card information if the shopper selects wire transfer. After just one weekend of having the new site, sales increased 40% week over week, Whiteflash says. ●

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