

Google, Schmoogle

Search engines should help people aggregate, sift and create a consideration-set prior to purchase.

Not a day goes by without someone telling me a story about how they started their quest for just about everything on Google and how they painstakingly knitted together a collated view of the world they were trying to find.

Friends have told me about bringing: a folder to the vet to debate the best therapy for the dog; a bound collection of e-retailer descriptions to the electronics store; and a pasted-together spreadsheet that lines up towel thread-counts in the hopes of finding Egyptian cotton body-wraps at the lowest possible price.

What is wrong with this picture? We can all agree that the way people make any purchase decision that's more complicated than buying a \$0.99 song on iTunes tends to start with search (yes, word-of-mouth is another starter). So why do we, as advertisers, marketers and sales folks, leave so much to chance?

Let's start with the potential buyer. We know that a committed "searcher" will make a purchase 80–85 percent of the time. But where are they in the process? Do they know enough about the subject matter to be comfortable making a decision? Do they need a logical progression through available content that at least makes them dangerous about the subject—if not an expert?

Actually, the potential evolution of the search function has been happening over the last year or so. Some of the new entrants are innovative and on

the way to making sense from a researching buyer's perspective.

The New York Times recently wrote about a new online social-network called Mog that not only enables members to meet other people with similar musical tastes, but also view music videos based on the songs in their music libraries. "Imagine if YouTube knew what songs were in your music collection...it's the ultimate mash-up," says David Hyman, Mog's CEO.

Mog is actually just one of a number of online services that promise to build communities—and sell new music—based on what your music collection says about you, according to the *Times*. You've probably already heard of Pandora, where musicologists suggest other artists you might like based on those you identify as your favorites.

Or perhaps you've stumbled across Last.fm, which is premised not on expert opinion but rather "the wisdom of the crowd." You download software that first analyzes the songs on your computer, and then creates your own personal "radio station" by correlating your collection to some "65 million tracks by 8 million artists" worldwide as found on other people's computers.

Last.fm then takes things a step further, by creating a community out of its 15 million users, who can "contact others whose musical tastes correspond significantly" with their own. A newer entry is Slacker, which offers a free software player and sells a portable device you can use to take your personalized music with you.

Ask.com actually allows you to preserve all of your searches for future reference—which is a very good step towards providing comprehensive research capability on your way to making a buying decision. This capability, as one of a handful of search

“accessories,” puts us on our way toward a smart buying experience.

Seth Godin’s site, Squidoo, is the closest thing to buyer-generated content for fellow buyers. It includes sponsorships around topics for the purpose of selling via user-generated pages.

The lead-in copy on the homepage reads: *“Squidoo is the world’s most popular site for people who want to build a page about their passions. Highlight books, blogs, vids, online shops, or just spread the word about stuff you love. Bonus: you raise money (for you or charity) at the same time! It’s fast, free, and supereasy. (Pssst: it only takes 4.2 minutes to get started...)”*

However, Squidoo is not a research-based site. There is plenty of hype and pseudo-reviews (users get points to create passionate environments on whatever makes them, well, passionate). Unfortunately, getting rewarded sounds a lot like paying people to tout products (and there are enough pseudo word-of-mouth offers out there).

Another example of this business model is iRazoo. The engine aims at improving the quality of the results it gives back to searchers by awarding points to those users recommending (or actively not recommending) websites.

Clicking on a site returned by iRazoo will open a new window and ask whether or not you recommend the site. Users can earn up to 50 points per day by doing this, although it would take a very long time to earn enough to trade in for a digital camera or an iPod.

Which gets to the point about research. In many ways, these new search entries are, at their hearts, about *advertising*, or ad-like business models.

It is up to marketers to turn search into a *facilitator*. Tools for the consumer will be the next wave in marketing automation. However, before this happens and becomes standard fare, marketers need to get out of the way and be led by our consumers as they begin each journey toward buying something from someone.

As it stands now, we are in the early stages of development. So far, marketers haven’t necessarily been a part of the development lifecycle, although Squidoo, Digg, Delicious and other consumer-generated aggregators and communities can easily make the move toward a marketing perspective. Hopefully, there’s more to come.

Innovation does start with the consumer—but we need to spend the time and observe the new consumer—using digital tools and free-flowing information to understand the new sales funnel and how people are making buying decisions today. ■

Searching for Sales

Here’s a list of functionality that will benefit every single one of us looking to shop, understand what we are shopping/looking for and ending up with that warm-and-fuzzy feeling that we made a purchase and actually felt good about the experience:

- When search results are returned, ask searchers if they want to learn more. If the search term is “big screen TVs,” ask searchers if they would like to be educated about the subject.
- Create a virtual data room (MySpace for purchase decisions) that is robust enough to deliver all types of information in an enjoyable, yet comprehensive, way (Ask.com is a very good start).
- Ask specifically: “How much do you know about this topic?“, and give searchers an opportunity to opt-in to some kind of content flow—a curriculum, if you will, that allows searchers to learn as they go.
- Let the consumer control the level, type and kind of information. Some people love spreadsheets, others streaming video, and still others are happy to read consumer-written content. Let the individual tailor the experience to get the most out of it.
- Allow for third-party content through RSS feeds and the like. Get searchers comfortable with the topic because they might not even be at the point where they are thinking about prices. After all, how can someone who knows little or nothing about a topic (*e.g.*, long-term health insurance) consider how much it costs if they have no context?
- Give advertisers the ability to sponsor (sponsorship does not mean advertise) these virtual spaces and good things will happen—tailored offers, direct chats and online phone calls with reps, for example.



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