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# Search Facilities on the UK's Online Stores

A report by Snow Valley

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## Introduction

Most online retailers these days recognise the value of search engine marketing. However, there is another element of search that is moving higher up the e-commerce agenda and that is the quality of the internal search facility on a retailer's website.

The two are connected - one of the reasons why retailers are looking to improve their on-site searches is that Google has raised the bar in terms of what consumers expect a search box to do for them. If Google can trawl millions of web pages and return relevant results, why can't a retailer manage to trawl their own website effectively?

The other, more compelling, reason is that internal site search can have a major bearing on converting visitors to buyers. If a customer is presented with poor search results, they may well have a go at resubmitting a different term, but chances are they will go elsewhere to a competitor that recognises their spelling mistakes and presents the results the customer was looking for. With retailers spending more money on attracting traffic to their websites, it is crucial that those visitors are converted to customers in order to maximise orders, revenues and marketing ROI. A good quality search is an essential tool for that challenge.

Snow Valley has completed a significant amount of work on search this year, adding a new advanced search tool to our e-commerce platform. As part of this, we did some research to find out what consumers can expect from the search facilities on the websites of the UK's leading online retailers and the results make interesting reading.

We discovered, for example, that 6 of the sites we visited did not have any kind of search facility at all.

We also found limited flexibility when it came to spelling mistakes and plurals. The onus was very much on the customer to get the search term right - over half of the sites failed to handle common spelling mistakes, whilst 60% failed to recognise fairly basic synonyms.

The accuracy of the search results was better - 71% delivered relevant results for phrase searches such as 'red dress'. However searches for non-product information, such as 'delivery', fared abysmally, with 80% of sites failing to return relevant information.

When the search did work, the customer was still often left with a lot of work to do. Only 30% allowed the customer to filter their results and 38% offered a sorting option. This meant that if a search returned 100 possible products the customer had to trawl through all of them to find the one they wanted.

The one area where we did find some consistency was the positioning of the search facility - 78% of the retailers placed their search box at the top of the home page

## Objectives and Methodology

The overall objective of this piece of research was to assess the search facilities that are available to consumers shopping on the UK's online stores. We wanted to establish current trends and areas of difference, with the longer term aim of repeating the exercise in future, allowing us to monitor changes and improvements.

We visited 100 UK online stores in September/October 2005 and evaluated the search navigation facilities on each site.

Four key areas were evaluated:

1. Search Options & Location
2. Search Flexibility
3. Search Relevance
4. Search Results Presentation

# Summary of Findings

## Section 1: Search Options & Location

- 6 of the online stores we visited had no search facility whatsoever.
- In 62 cases, the search facility was a single text box. 21 of these had made it clear that the customer could search using either a keyword or a product code.
- Only 21 of the sites had an advanced search facility.
- 78 sites had located the search facility at the top of their homepage.

## Section 2: Search Flexibility

- 57 of the retailers failed to handle simple spelling mistakes or typos.
- 61 failed to recognise obvious synonyms.
- 62 of the sites could not handle a natural language search.
- 14 failed to identify simple plural search terms.

## Section 3: Search Relevance & Accuracy

- An overwhelming number of retailers (80) failed to return relevant results for a search relating to delivery or customer services information.
- 51 retailers delivered highly relevant results if a customer opted to carry out a phrase search, such as 'red dress'.
- An additional 21 retailers returned everything red and all dresses, but were able to rank the results, putting the more relevant red dresses at the top of the list.
- 64 sites allowed the customer to search using product codes and only 3 of them failed to return the correct product when this was tested.

## Section 4: Search Results Presentation

- 67 of the sites displayed no stock or delivery information in the results.
- 84 displayed product images with the results, but only 31 showed product descriptions.
- 70 of the retailers did not give the customer the option to filter their results.
- 62 of the retailers failed to let the customer sort their results.
- 29 of the retailers did not allow the customer to share their search results.

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## Section One: Search Options & Location

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### 1. Did the retailer have a search facility on their site?

Search Facility	Sites	%
Yes	94	94%
No	6	6%
TOTAL	100	100

Somewhat surprisingly, 6 of the retailers we visited did not give the customer the option of searching for a product on their site. The customer could only navigate the site using the menu.

### 2. What type of search facility was provided?

Search option/s	Sites	%
1 search box	41	41%
1 search box clearly allowing keyword or product code search	21	21%
Text search box + attribute search (eg dropdown containing departments)	20	20%
2 search boxes - a search box and a product code search box	6	6%
Other/no search options	12	12%
TOTAL	100	100%

62 of the retailers had a single search box located somewhere on their homepage. The other 32 retailers with search facilities had opted for a variety of other approaches:

- 6 retailers had separate fields for keywords and product code (although when tested it was often possible to carry out a keyword search in the code box, and vice versa).
- 20 retailers had a free text search box, but had enhanced this with an attribute search feature. This allowed the customer to type in a keyword and then restrict their search according to fixed attributes pertinent to the retailer, such as a particular department.

### 3. Did the retailer provide the customer with an advanced search facility\*?

Advanced search	Sites	%
No	73	73%
Yes	21	21%
Other	6	6%
TOTAL	100	100%

Only 21 of the retailers provided an advanced search. 20 of these let the customer go straight to an advanced search. Only 1 insisted that the customer complete a basic search first.

\*The retailer had to provide a clickable link somewhere on their site to either an 'advanced search' or 'further search' page to qualify as having an 'advanced search'.

### 4. Where was the search facility positioned on the website?

Position of search field	Sites	%
Top right	38	38%
Top left	27	27%
Top centre	13	13%
Bottom right	1	1%
Bottom left	3	3%
Left side bar- top of the page	4	4%
Left side bar - bottom of the page	2	2%
Left side bar - centre of the page	6	6%
N/A - no search facility	6	6%
TOTAL	100	100%

78% of the retailers positioned the search facility somewhere at the top of the home page.

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## Section 2: Flexibility

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In this section, we were looking at whether the retailer could accommodate errors within a customer's search. Could the site handle an obvious spelling mistake for example, or was the onus on the customer to get their search term right first time?

### 1. Plurals: did the retailer's search facility recognise simple plurals?

We tested simple plurals where the search term required no more than an 's' to be added. We avoided more complex plurals such as 'scarves' instead of 'scarf'.

Recognise Plurals?	Sites	%
Yes	77	77%
No	14	14%
Other	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

Recognising the use of a plural is quite elementary - a customer looking for 'shirts' is obviously looking for the same thing as a customer searching for 'shirt'. Indeed there is a case for saying that the customer is more likely to use a plural, as they are expecting more than one product to be returned.

However, 14 of the sites we looked at failed to match the plural to its singular equivalent, presenting a customer searching for a simple plural term like 'shirts' with no results.

### 2a. Fuzzy Search: did the site recognise simple spelling mistakes?

We tested each site for 3 types of minor errors, namely; adding or leaving out single letters; using the incorrect vowel; and using letters in the wrong order - see examples below.

Fuzzy search worked?	Sites	%
No	57	58%
Yes - recognised 3 out of 3 spelling mistakes	20	20%
Yes - recognised 2 out of 3 spelling mistakes	9	9%
Yes - recognised 1 out of 3 spelling mistakes	5	5%
Other	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

A huge proportion of site searches are mis-spelt, either as typos, where the customer simply mis-types the term, or as genuine spelling mistakes, where the customer does not know how to spell the word properly. The errors we tested were very common, but our findings were disappointing:

- 57 of the sites failed to handle all of the mistakes, returning no results on all 3 occasions.
- Only 20 sites managed to return relevant results for all 3 mis-spelt terms.

**Search**

**Search**

**Search**

### 3. Synonyms: did the search facility recognise synonyms?

Recognise synonyms	Sites	%
No	61	61%
Yes	30	30%
Other	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

The ability to recognise synonyms is important for all retailers, but especially for those targeting the US or other English-speaking countries. Again, we were careful to use obvious synonyms and where possible we used the same synonym for retailers within specific sectors.

Yet once again the results were disappointing; only 30 sites dealt with the synonyms and returned relevant results. On nearly two thirds of the sites we visited the search failed to recognise that the customer was using an obvious alternative, forcing the customer to adopt the retailer's chosen term - or go elsewhere.

### 4. Natural Search: did a natural language search work?

A natural language search refers to an instance where the customer asks a question or types a sentence to describe what they are looking for, for example "Do you sell socks?"

Natural language search work	Sites	%
No	62	62%
Yes	29	29%
Others	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

Only 29 sites managed to accommodate our natural language search, returning a list of products that were relevant to the question or sentence typed by the customer. Interestingly, one of the retailers advised us to try a natural language search when the original keyword search failed. It didn't work however.

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## Section 3: Relevance & Accuracy

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In this section, we tested the relevance and accuracy of the search results that were returned for 3 different types of search - a phrase search, a product code search and a search for information rather than a product.

### 5. Phrase Search: if 2 words were typed into the search, eg 'red dress', what did the search return?

Search for 'red dress'	Sites	%
Only dresses available in red were returned	51	51%
All dresses and red products were returned, but red dresses first	21	34%
All dresses and red products were returned, in any order	13	
Other	15	15%
TOTAL	100	100%

This was a very interesting area, with 72 retailers managing to return relevant results:

- 51 of the retailers returned only products containing both terms, ie only dresses available in red, thus achieving highly relevant results.
- 34 retailers returned a list of products matching one or other of the terms - ie dresses that were not available in red and other products that were red but not dresses.
- However, 21 of these sites ranked the results with red dresses at the top of the list.
- A minority of the sites (3) were only able to process one word in the search term - they either returned dresses or red products only.

### 6. Product Code Search: could the customer search using product codes and did it work?

Product code search worked	Sites	%
Yes - product code search worked	61	61%
No product codes	28	28%
Yes but product code search failed	3	3%
Others	8	8%
TOTAL	100	100%

The standard of accuracy was good here. 64 sites had product codes attached to their products, and of these only 3 failed to return the correct product. Product code searches on the 7 sites with a separate product search box (see question 2) all worked.

### 7. Delivery Information: did a search for 'delivery' work?

Delivery information recognised	Sites	%
No	80	80%
Yes	11	11%
Others	9	9%
TOTAL	100	100%

This was possibly the most surprising finding in our research. Amazingly, 80% of the sites failed to return relevant information if the customer searched for 'delivery'.

This is surprising on two levels. Firstly, delivery is becoming a differentiator in where a customer chooses to shop, and not being able to locate key information might result in the customer going elsewhere. Secondly, although we only tested for delivery information, the findings suggest that the search on retailers' sites is confined to the product catalogue. Other content is not being searched, so searches for store opening times or customer service information would also prove fruitless.

## Section 4: Search Results Presentation

In Section 4, we were looking at what information was displayed within the search results and how the retailers were balancing the need to provide a tidy and manageable list of search results while simultaneously allowing customers to see sufficient information about each product listed.

The diagram below shows how the sites we looked at ranked against our 'best practice' criteria. There was a wide variance in the sites: some offered all the facilities listed below, and some offered almost none. One of the clear failings in the majority of the sites was the customer's ability to customise the search results (see **Sorting** and **Filtering**).

The diagram shows a screenshot of a search results page for 'camera' on the website www.BestPractice.com. The page displays search results for 'camera' with 46 items found. The search results are presented in a list format, showing product names, prices, and availability. The page includes a search bar, a filter list, and a sort by dropdown menu. The annotations highlight the following features:

- Number of Results Pages:** 66% showed the number of results pages returned.
- Sharing Search Results:** 65% allowed a customer to forward a link containing search results.
- Filtering:** 30% allowed the customer to filter their results.
- Original Search Term:** 77% of the retailers showed the original search term.
- Number of Products:** 73% showed the number of products returned.
- Product Images:** 84% of retailers displayed product images. 3 sites gave the customer the choice.
- Product Descriptions:** 31% of retailers showed product descriptions.
- Sorting:** 38% allowed the customer to sort results.
- Stock Availability & Delivery Information:** 4% of retailers showed both a product's stock availability and delivery. In 78 cases the customer only found out later that an item presented within a list of search results was not actually in stock.
- Add to Basket from Search List:** 48% let the customer add a product to basket from the search list.

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### **For More Information:**

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