

COLUMNS

Key tips for creating a user-friendly shopping experience for mobile consumers

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Who wants to shop for boots or books on a smartphone? Turns out, more people than many marketers might have guessed. As people invite their tablets and smartphones into nearly every situation in their lives, it is no surprise that they are using these devices for researching products and making purchases even from the comforts of their sofa.

This couch commerce phenomenon follows two changes in the past two years: First, people have grown more comfortable with smaller screens and, second, network speeds and security have improved. The trend of buying anytime anywhere will continue as ecommerce retailers make usability improvements.

In fact, eMarketer estimates that mobile commerce rose 81 percent to \$25 billion in 2012, and this year, it is expected to account for 15 percent of all retail ecommerce.

There is some question about which platform will win out tablets are edging out smartphones 55 percent to 45 percent, according to the Internet Retailer Mobile 500 report, while comScore data shows smartphones outpacing tablets.

Either way, the writing is on the wall mobile commerce is a huge growth opportunity.

The degree to which customers are at home in your mobile store depends on how easily they can navigation and search from their phones or tablets.

Mobile shoppers want immediate answers and the ability to conduct transactions quickly, so anything that might slow down browsing and checking out can cost you.

Here are a few tips to keep in mind to create a positive, profitable experience.

Enact multiple strategies. First, recognize that smartphone and tablet shoppers are likely looking for different experiences. What is more, technical specifications for the wide range of devices available vary as well.

Develop ways to help customers browse and find products that are specific to each device. Responsive design can be one way to go about this, as you do not have to create a different site for each device.

However, contrary to what many might think, responsive design is not necessarily the least costly or time-consuming option, as it requires heavy coding to enact.

Creating separate mobile site layouts for smartphones and tablets can be just as effective, and can tailor the experience to the device that the visitor is using.

Create an amazing tablet experience. Unlike shoppers using phones, those browsing your mobile storefront on a tablet are likely to be sitting comfortably at home and are in a more leisurely state of mind. They may be shopping

users are likely to be using considerably, at home and in a more relaxed, state of mind. They may be shopping for a big-ticket item with a loved one, as tablets are ideal for showing another person what you're considering.

Research from comScore shows that average spending per device owner is 20 percent higher on tablets, and Internet Retailer Mobile 500 agrees, going on to say that tablet shoppers convert at a much higher rate.

If your demographic is a tablet-friendly one, it is critical that your search and navigation tools help speed the path from browsing to buying. Additionally, if someone is ready to buy, indicating whether an item is in stock and ready to ship can seal the deal.

Take advantage of tablet features for photos. If your product photos benefit from shoppers being able to zoom in or click for different views, take advantage of fingertip taps and swipes to put shoppers in the driver's seat.

Allow users to pinch images, rotate them with their fingers, and hold to load a bigger image.

Boden USA, for example, allows tablet users to zoom into images by mousing over them. Even better, it offers an application that mimics the paper catalog experience, turning pages with the swipe of a finger. Consider adding these types of capabilities within search results.

Allowing users to play with images at the search level can help them compare products while being able to access additional refinements and sort options. Do not dumb down your tablet site to allow only what might be suitable for a phone screen.

Rethink navigation and buttons. Whether on a smartphone or tablet, a user expects to tap the screen to navigate. However, small text menus particularly the ones often used in search filter lists are hard to tap without hitting another menu item by mistake.

The same goes for buttons or page numbers that are too close together. It can be maddening for a user to click and find herself loading the wrong page, especially on a slower network where backing up to an earlier page can seem to take forever.

While small text links may work on a desktop, make sure action buttons and font sizes for links are significantly larger for your mobile sites.

Drop-down menus are often ideal here, as they allow a wide range of refinements and options while saving screen space when not in use. This is especially helpful on smartphone sites, since it allows visitors to view larger products and more content without scrolling.

Promote the search box. For smartphone and tablet storefronts, make sure the search box is large and easy to find. Make it larger and more prominent than the one on your standard online storefront.

Smartphone and tablet users alike will appreciate an extra search box at the bottom of Web pages. This allows shoppers to easily continue exploring the site without having to scroll back up to the top.

Redesign your search results. Think about how a user will interact with your search results on a wide range of devices.

For example, a smartphone shopping site's search results page should have just one column of content to maximize the use of the limited space.

For each product, you will want to include a clear thumbnail image, the product name, a short description and the price. Your tablet shopping site search results page, however, can display two or three columns in a grid view a scaled-down version of the four or five columns you might use on your desktop site.

If you really want to be customer-centric, allow users to choose their preferred view, selecting the number of columns with a swipe.

Make it easy for phone users to buy. Consumers use smartphones as shopping tools for many reasons. They might be looking for store locations and hours, finding out if a particular product is in stock, or even seeking a better price while in a bricks-and-mortar store.

To turn these hunters into shoppers, make the purchase as easy and intuitive as possible. This can be as simple as adding a "Buy" button beneath the product description or image on the search results page.

Whenever possible, display discounted prices. And to really make a difference, simplify the checkout process by reducing the numbers of steps required.

For those who prefer to shop in-person or who need to have something in hand today, providing nearby product availability through "In Stock" or "Available Nearby" searches can help them take the next step.

THE SMARTPHONE AND tablet landscape is continuing to change rapidly as technology is enhanced and capabilities improve.

At the same time, consumers are more comfortable seeking information and completing purchases over these trusted devices.

Your own Web site analytics are likely to bear this out. See which devices shoppers are using when they visit your site and when they make a purchase, and make sure they are getting the service and experience that your brand promises.

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