ECOMMERCE GROWTH WITHOUT ADVERTISING

By Greg Harris

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Introduction

This book began in frustration. I've had visibility into dozens of eCommerce teams and virtually all were doing search engine optimization (SEO) wrong. Well maybe not wrong, but they failed to focus on what all eCommerce teams care most about: selling stuff for a profit! So, I'm going to call that WRONG. Marketing teams need to customize their SEO strategies to the way eCommerce sites run their businesses. This book makes the case that eCommerce teams need to approach Search Marketing with a different playbook.

This book is written by an eCommerce addict turned search marketing expert. The transformation came late in life, but it seemed clear to me that there was a gap between what worked and what most companies were doing. That gap became my second career.

My journey as a marketer started over three decades ago—long before there was anything called eCommerce, but I spent most of the 1980s training to be an eCommerce professional. My early experience was dedicated to developing direct marketing strategies which, at the time, was one of the most quantitative and scientific of the marketing disciplines. The goals for direct marketing are to get an order and motivate the target into taking a buying action—sound familiar? It's true we used paper, mail and catalogs and had to wait weeks before the checks arrived in the mail, but the transition to eCommerce was a natural.

Direct marketing, back in the day, was the nerdy side of marketing. We used big data before that was a thing. We did A/B testing, dared to call it "split testing" and everything was

centered on measuring the results with great precision. By the 1990s we were moving toward eCommerce at a rapid pace. I was there early and remember the transition as unremarkable except that everything moved faster and created bigger results.

As an eCommerce guy, I interacted with the search engine optimization community throughout my career, but they never seemed to understand me. Beginning in the late 1990s I was a VP of Marketing in what would become a successful eCommerce website and would spend the next 20 years specializing in eCommerce, but I never felt that the SEO community cared about what I cared about:

- I cared about dollars and orders; not eyeballs and site traffic.
- I only funded what I could measure and I measured in dollars.
- I cared about products and wasn't sure how that translated to keywords.
- I saw organic search and paid search as one marketing program; not separate programs with separate strategies.

I wanted to test SEO. I wanted to measure. And I wanted an ROI if I was going to invest in search optimization. This was no less than I would expect from any other marketing program and when I saw other sites relax this standard seemingly just for SEO, I was baffled.

Frankly, throughout my career, I didn't invest much more than I ever invested in search optimization largely because I viewed SEO as a "fuzzy" program. At the same time, I was funding everything that I could measure. Using this approach, I ranked my programs by return on investment and hopefully, that would help me to make smart marketing investment decisions.

There was always an SEO program somewhere in my marketing stack, but it was the ugly step-child of my marketing portfolio. I paid attention to the data I could measure but wasn't sure how to invest in scaling search profitably.

And then two things happened. The first was a revenue shortfall and the second was that I was out of brilliant ideas. And when those two happen at once, we tend to get a little desperate. I was left to wonder if it was possible to substantially drive up organic sales. I quickly concluded that the opportunity was significant and that what I thought was "pretty good" organic performance in hindsight was embarrassingly low.

I set out on a quest to find a way to make SEO work better for eCommerce and turn it from a "fuzzy" discipline that's hard to measure into one that can be optimized for profit. Many people mistakenly think of SEO as a set of technical fixes to a site to improve the overall visibility, but I concluded that all of my competitors were already ahead of me here. Yes, technical SEO was necessary to keep up with my competitors, but not enough to achieve my investment goals. I put on my big thinking cap and went back to creation. Google's creation, that is.

Google has been pretty darn consistent throughout its existence: deliver the best result for any search query. That's the only advice Google initially gave. Winning the search marketing game is largely about connecting content to searchers as efficiently and effectively as possible. Simple enough. It made sense, so I decided that was my search strategy too.

What emerged was an approach that was different than what I saw others doing and that's always a little scary early on. It took us about nine months of planning before we could launch the effort and after one month, we saw nothing. Nada. I remember making what I thought was a strong case that we had stopped the organic bleeding but it was very hard to see any incremental profit opportunity in those early days.

Six months later it was a very different story. Organic traffic was up 2X and showed no signs of slowing down. eCommerce Growth without Advertising worked and it didn't require following all the same SEO rules I had learned throughout my career.

This is not a How-To book, because there is no ONE way to optimize an eCommerce site. There are literally millions of strategies that work, and probably an equal number that don't. Instead, this book offers a different perspective and a toolkit designed to help good marketers find the strategies that will work best. With a bit of luck, this book will simply get you to rethink a few things you think you already know. Hopefully, you will start to see search marketing optimization through an eCommerce lens and provide a framework for driving profits.

1
Chapter

Competitive Content

A Brief History of SEO

Back in the good old days when the black hats and the white hats competed in the newly emerging world of search engine optimization (SEO), small changes could deliver a huge change in results. Companies could rocket to the top of a search result one day only to come crashing back down when someone at Google realized that the site was trying to game the system. Early on it was hard to determine what was a black hat technique, and what worked evolved fairly dramatically over time.

Since those early Wild West days when SEO seemed like a high-risk high-reward game, the industry has matured. Google helped by educating marketers and hinting at what's important and what's not and the SEO community seemed to come together to create a series of best practice standards that are well known today.

In every case, these standards were designed to help search engines crawl and understand the underlying results on a website to help match a given search query to the best result. But a problem would soon emerge. A Google search on the phrase "Chocolate Bar," for example, produces over 1.7 billion results! There may be billions of results in the Google index, but only 10 results were really relevant. What I cared about was clicks and it appears that over 90% of all clicks happen on the first search engine results page (SERP). Any way you look at it, those are long odds!

Figure 1 A search on "chocolate bar" reveals over 1.7 billion results.

A Brief History of eCommerce

While the webmasters were trying to figure out how to please the search algorithm, eCommerce managers were trying to figure out what types of products people would and wouldn't buy online. (Spoiler alert: it would take us a decade to conclude that people would buy anything online). In the early days of eCommerce, we were struggling with simple things like giving visitors enough information to place an order. I worked at a site that had little more on the product detail page than a cryptic title, an internal ordering number (SKU) and a price nothing more.

Even before eCommerce experts thought about the need to optimize a page for search engines, we knew that content was critical to giving the customer enough information to make a purchase.

Many of us struggled to create content and the industry of third-party content creators emerged to build and syndicate eCommerce content for websites. Initially, this was built by converting scanned documents or datasheets into something useful for a webpage. And so began the eCommerce content industry. Eventually, every manufacturer would provide eCommerce content to their distribution channel partners, but some time would pass before the problem would emerge.

A Brief History of Competitive Content

We've established that getting to page one is difficult. While every site should focus on search engine visibility (Technical SEO), standing out and making it to the first SERP page requires demonstrating that the site delivers better content for the given query.

Today's eCommerce content is largely created by product manufacturers and overall the quality is great. It's typically well done, complete and the best news for the eCommerce community is that someone else was paying for it. The downside is that this same content is used by sites around the world and when search engines see duplicative content, the value of that content is ignored in favor of the content's original creator. While manufacturer content certainly helps convert traffic, it does nothing to help optimize a site for organic search.

Over half of all eCommerce begins with a search and that's likely higher for business-to-business sites, so being visible to searchers is critical. And that's when the most sophisticated sites tested and concluded that unique content was required to win the search wars.

While there are hundreds of factors that get a specific URL to page one of a search, it's easy to see that the underlying content in the first page results is getting longer and longer. Content depth, or word count, has increased dramatically over the years.

It makes sense that the best results have more words. Longer pages can cover more topics or go deeper into a single topic. More content also helps improve engagement metrics, largely because it takes longer to read and things like time on site and bounce rate are important considerations for search engines. Well-written content that holds a reader is one of the ways search engines measure the quality of the information. And that's how the content war started.

Today, if you search something like "futuristic cell phone" the worst first-page result (position number 10) has over 5,800 words of content! It's common for popular search phrases to consistently find 1,000+ words of content for the page-one results, but it's too simple to conclude that the secret to eCommerce is to be more of a publisher than a seller. In fact, the best content strategies recognize that aiming for the most popular phrases might not be the best approach for eCommerce sites.

The Buying Journey

We're all familiar with the concept of a sales funnel. We bring prospects into the top of the funnel and then try to move the prospect down the sales funnel until they either pop out a loser (no purchase) or drop out of the bottom of the funnel as a customer (success). While it's easy to visualize this relationship when you think about how a Sales Rep sells, in the world of eCommerce, instead of a Sales Rep there is content that's designed to move the customer from investigation into consideration and through to purchase.

The process of leading a site visitor down the funnel by offering a variety of content is something we think of as the buying journey. What is often forgotten about this journey is that buyers rarely travel in a straight line. Instead, what's more common is that the journey includes multiple internet searches along the way. A buyer may initially search on broad terms high up in their funnel and then increasingly narrow that search as they get closer to purchasing. Today's best sites have content that's designed to be visible throughout the buying journey, matching content to the expected search behavior as the prospect progresses. Another way to think of the same approach is to develop content strategies at the product page, category page and for long-form content as well, all designed to connect with buyers' search queries.

Competitive Conclusions

Most organizations spend more time internally talking about technical SEO challenges than building a more profitable content strategy. Technical SEO is the baseline that most sites figured out long ago. All of this is important stuff, but merely a foundation for a site's content. Winning the search customer is as simple as building better content for a given search.

We live in an ultra-competitive world, but within the world of eCommerce, we are swimming in manufacturer-supplied duplicative content. Winning with better content isn't easy but there is huge potential.

A few years ago I consulted with a firm that offered "low price cell phone cases." That was just about the only keyword phrase they wanted to focus on. It was easy to conclude that this is a highly competitive product category where it might be hard for latecomers to climb to page one. My client had limited product content and no category content, but what we did together was to build out a Frequently Asked Questions section for the site that filled a content gap and matched perfectly with what customers were searching for. Despite the technical weaknesses of the site, they didn't just hit page one but they reached the number one slot ahead of much stronger sites.

The most sophisticated and profitable eCommerce sites invest in content for every layer of the purchase process. Long-form, category and original product content all play a role in the buyer's purchase journey. It's not enough anymore for sites to get away with using the same manufacturer content that everyone else uses. The best content strategies involve finding content gaps between a search and a result that is vulnerable to better content to help people make a purchase decision.

The site that engages visitors better, holds them on the site longer and motivates the visitor to move forward in their purchase journey, is likely a site that is content-optimized and going to win the search marketing war.

2
Chapter

Volume vs. Value

Rethinking Standard SEO Strategies

Our SEO founding fathers designed a system that has performed well for years, but as we've established, in a competitive content environment, technical SEO offers few if any competitive advantages. Similarly, the traditional "one-size-fits-all" SEO Strategies that almost everyone uses are clearly not optimal for eCommerce sites. eCommerce is a little different–in a good way!

Let's be blunt. The eCommerce community is not the most creative of marketers. We rarely win web-creative awards and I'm sure others are convinced we wear green eyeshades while we work. That's because we are focused on one thing. All eCommerce marketers have a single objective: we focus on the money! We optimize sites with a transaction in mind. And it's this focus on driving conversions that influences the entire eCommerce marketing stack. SEO strategies, however, are not typically focused on conversions.

When we recognize, as a community, that we are different, that frees us to think about how to customize the search optimization strategies specifically to our needs.

Let's start by reviewing the standard approach to optimizing content for search engines. Most will advise that you follow these steps:

- Pick some keywords
- Rank those keywords based on average monthly search volume
- Discover more keywords that have similar meanings and maybe even higher search volumes
- Prioritize those keywords where you aren't on page one but maybe are already on page two
- Create content around these keywords

We'll spend a lot of time in the chapters ahead talking about different approaches to organic optimization, but let's start with what's missing from the list above. The list above presumes that eCommerce sites have a list of keywords. That's not how we think. We think in terms of products, which is a very different starting point than starting with keywords.

Many of the steps above presume that the higher the average monthly search volume (AMS), the more important that keyword is to the site. AMS definitely plays a role, but optimizing search volume alone is not enough for an eCommerce site. But, before we go any further, we have to understand how search volume is collected and communicated.

Limitations of Average Monthly Search Volume

Average monthly search volume is the presumed number of searches for a given keyword phrase. This data, even when coming from sources like Google, has never been precise. The number is typically represented as a 52-week average and sometimes expressed as a range. Since most eCommerce experts are quantitatively oriented working in real-time, the lack of precision can be worrisome.

An industry emerged to help us track search rank and average monthly search volume, but somewhere along the way, Google seems to have made that data harder and harder for these companies to acquire.

AMS Concerns
1) Expressed as a range
2) Expressed as a 52-week moving average
3) Difficult to sum data because the counts overlap
4) No two services agree and the differences can be dramatic.

Some services are clearly using old data while others tried to come up with new approaches for estimating the number even when Google didn't provide it. <u>The truth is that no one quite knows exactly what the search volume is for a given keyword</u>.

Let's take an example. I searched the same keywords on two different rank tracking software platforms: SEM Rush and aHref. Both companies acknowledge that they use different approaches, but the magnitude of the differences is quite startling.

Search Phrase	SEM Rush	aHref
eCommerce	49,500	81,000
Shop Online	49,500	7,700

I searched the two phrases "eCommerce" and "Shop Online." I suppose one could conclude that collectively aHref says this represents 88,700 searches a month while SEM Rush says the two phrases generate 99,000 so maybe they are collectively within 10% or so. But, what are the odds that "eCommerce" and "Shop Online" would have the same number of searches every month? Or does SEM Rush see them as the same search? And why does aHref think that "eCommerce" is ten times more popular as a keyword than "Shop Online"?

I can't answer any of these questions. We live in an age of computers and they are very good at counting. It seems clear that these firms are guessing. Data like this is definitely useful, but I think it's important to diversify the SEO data strategy and not rely on any one number too much. So what other data might be useful to eCommerce sites?

CPC: The Other Key Metric

Everything I dislike about AMS is what I love about using the cost-per-click (CPC) average. CPC is the average paid search price for the first ad position on the search marketing page.

I often get the question, what does a paid search have to do with organic? And that's when I like to remind people that there is only one search marketing page. There are a top and bottom and left and right and there are both paid and organic links throughout this page. And yet it is still just one page with one searcher and it should have one marketing strategy with multiple tactics.

Here's why I think CPC is an important number for eCommerce sites to incorporate into an SEO optimization strategy.

- **It's precise.** Quite literally to the penny!

- **It's current.** Market pricing fluctuates with demand and this number can change daily.

- **It's market-based.** No one would purposely overpay for a click. Thus, the CPC represents the value of the click and thus the value of the query. Most importantly this means the query is connected to DOLLARS which, by definition, makes it critical for eCommerce!

Take a keyword example like "refrigerator sale." At some point, this keyword costs about $0.89 for a click. If a website pays that price and converts 2% of those clicks into a sale, then that means the cost of that sale is $44.50. That's not an unreasonable customer acquisition cost for a $500 sale. But at 9%, it's not what I would call a bargain either. In this case, the CPC looks like an excellent measure of the value of a single click and since eCommerce sites are optimized around sales, it makes sense to incorporate CPC into a content optimization strategy.

And the Winner Is: Volume & Value

eZdia has a client that asked us to set up a test and build content across the entire site. Some of the pages were optimized exclusively based on keyword AMS (volume). For other pages, we optimized them exclusively based on the highest CPC (value). After carefully comparing sales beginning six months after the first publishing date, we saw that volume-based pages out-performed value-based pages. This was certainly not what I expected.

But we had created a third group that was optimized for both volume AND value and when we compared that group to volume only, we saw a significant lift in revenue. Admittedly this analysis was for a single site, but the result was a whopping 27% increase in revenue when keyword value was incorporated into the content strategy.

As much as I love numbers and data, it's important to remember that our goal is to create the best content and this is a creative endeavor. Analytics and optimization don't help evaluate the quality and engagement level of the content. It's important to acknowledge that when we're talking about content, there is more than just picking the right keywords. That said, it seems clear that eCommerce sites should not rely too heavily on AMS when building a keyword strategy when the real goal is buyers, not visitors. In fact, as we'll discuss in the next chapter, eCommerce sites shouldn't focus too heavily on keywords at all.

3

Chapter

Keywords vs. Products

How Many Keywords
Would You Like to Track?

"How many keywords would you like to track?" That's the first question that most rank tracking software sales reps might ask you and that question never made any sense to me. eCommerce managers don't think in terms of keywords, they think in terms of products. You might think that this is a trivial difference, but in practice, it creates a fundamentally different approach to managing and optimizing organic content.

Chasing specific keywords will never provide full visibility to the site's organic traffic. By definition, a keyword focus presumes a short-tail success model optimized for a small handful of the most popular keywords. Most eCommerce sites think in terms of long-tail success, both in terms of their product strategy and in terms of the keyword strategy. While it's important to identify the most important keyword opportunities, ultimately the page should be optimized for total organic traffic instead of just the small handful of keywords that a site attempts to rank for.

Any single page might rank for thousands of keywords. Indeed, it may not be impossible to learn every specific search query that drives traffic to a given page, but we can measure the total organic traffic, orders and revenue and optimize for all keywords instead of just a few.

Product-Centric Search Optimization

eCommerce sites shouldn't adapt their processes to traditional organic strategies but instead should customize the organic

strategy to eCommerce. That means not starting with a keyword, but with a product and organizing the content strategy the same way that eCommerce teams manage products. Virtually every site organizes its products into Department, Category and Sub-Categories. It's only logical that eCommerce sites would rely on this same site taxonomy to optimize its organic (and paid search) sales. Instead of using rank tracking software as the starting point, a product-centric approach that is built around web analytics software (Examples: Google Analytics or Adobe's Omniture platform) is the only way to measure total organic performance.

While I believe it's important to design the measurement strategy first, the next step is to transition from metrics to keyword strategies. Every product tells its own story and every product needs its own search strategy. Rank tracking software can play a big role in helping identify keywords for a page.

It's important, however, that when using rank tracking software, to understand the quality and the weaknesses in this data.

- **Volume.** As discussed previously, there is little agreement among providers on the search volume and this is a number that may well be indicative but is not precise.

- **Rank.** The rank reported is collected by a "bot" that automatically searches and then records the results it finds. The problem is that most of us are logged into Google as we search, getting personalized results. These personalized results can differ dramatically from the results that an anonymous bot might get.

- **CTR.** The click-through rate is a key number with rank tracking services. It converts search volume into traffic and

other metrics specific to your site and your competitors. Rank tracking services don't have access to the actual click-through rate data and are forced to use sample data to estimate the click-through rate based on rank position. Again, a short-tail assumption and less appropriate for eCommerce sites.

- **Keywords.** It's expensive to crawl 10 pages of desktop and mobile results across multiple search engines for every keyword. These sites, at best, crawl a small subset of the total keyword searches and provide a limited view of the full search environment.

Product Detail Page
Keyword Strategies

For an average page, we typically try to identify 3 to 5 keywords based largely on the product information. At eZdia, we've automated some of this with software designed to extract the most obvious keywords and gather all necessary data about that keyword. This automation makes us more efficient, but the real benefit is that it forces us to broaden our approach to identifying possible keyword strategies. It also frees up our researchers to go beyond the obvious as they develop keyword strategies for each page.

Every possible keyword gets evaluated for relevance, current rank, value and overall competitiveness of the term. But keyword strategies are bigger than a single product. If you think about a product sub-category, most eCommerce sites have many similar products that could be optimized for the same keyword, but smart sites are better off optimizing at the sub-category level.

For example, let's say that there is one sweater and it comes in two different colors: blue and green. When similar pages have similar keywords, there is an opportunity to expand the use of keywords and strategically distribute these expansion keywords across a range of different pages. In addition to optimizing for "blue sweater" and "green sweater" respectively, one page might optimize for specific searches like "warm wool sweater" while the other page might emphasize "itch-free wool sweater." Orchestrating the content strategy around a subcategory allows a site to create a broader and more coordinated organic keyword footprint.

Choosing the right keywords starts with relevance but doesn't end there. Understanding the site's current rank for that keyword, the strength of the competition and the CPC value are all important factors for prioritization.

We discussed positioning content for distinct parts of the buying journey in Chapter One and as buyers get closer to making a purchase, their search queries change. Search engines also have a sense that the searcher is closer to ordering and we've seen search results changed purely based on where the searcher is in their buying journey. Content that targets a searcher early in the buyer's journey typically focuses on high-volume informational keywords while category pages are probably best populated with "consideration" keywords and product pages should focus on "transactional" keywords.

Keyword strategies are critical to an organic content strategy. It's not enough to build great content if it doesn't connect with what prospective customers are looking for. eCommerce sites need to approach the keyword strategy by building an optimization and performance measurement approach that is product-centric.

Schema for eCommerce

Schema is a special type of content that is especially appropriate for eCommerce. Sometimes called "structured data," this is a strategy for teaching the search engine the context of a given word on the product page. For example, while most of us will recognize that Sony is a brand name, the search engine might not. Schema tells the search engine that the value "Sony" is a brand name. There are hundreds of different fields including model number, SKU number, price, the aggregate rating, audience, color, and dimensions that put content into the context of the specific product.

The good news is that most eCommerce companies already have some schema data on the page, but a recent scan of top eCommerce sites found that while virtually all have deployed at least some schema code, few included more than just a couple of relevant fields. This is an obvious way to make sure that the search engines don't have to guess about the content context.

Even beyond structured data to describe a product's features, schema can be used to expand the search relevance of a product page. Schema fields like "isSimilarTo," "alternate name" or "isAccessoryOrSparePartFor" are all examples of ways of expanding the search relevance of an eCommerce page.

Schema is often a form of automated content that relies on descriptive data from a site's product information management system and ideally, this is a dynamically populated content strategy.

4

Chapter

Paid vs. Organic

Amazon's Impact on Paid Search

Over the past 18 months, I estimate that Amazon has increased its paid search traffic by 10x. While that's a big number, Amazon still appears to generate 90% of its search marketing traffic from organic clicks. When a company the size of Amazon increases its spending so dramatically, it comes with consequences for everyone else! During this same 18-month period, the average CPC for the paid search keywords has increased by 50%. Forget about the impact on Amazon, that means the price of paid search is up for all of us that are bidding on these keywords.

The Paid Search Problem

As digital marketing budgets grow, more money is funneled into paid search. Budgets appear to be growing faster than actual search inventory and since this is a market-based medium when demand outstrips supply, the cost goes up making it harder and harder to grow profitably with paid search. Most companies I talk to have a sad story to tell about their return on ad spend (ROAS), which is either down year over year or difficult to scale at their target ROAS.

ROAS is measured as incremental revenue against the cost of generating that revenue, but most of us quickly convert revenue into a true "return" number to understand just how much gross margin we are willing to give up to acquire another customer.

Paid search is a big line item in most eCommerce budgets, and it may be the best way to manipulate short-term revenue, but at the same time, it's a horrible long-term strategy in the face of a declining or stagnant ROAS. eCommerce teams that are

chasing a revenue number and losing that race, likely have no better short-term option than to get more aggressive with their paid search strategy. It's certainly difficult to extricate a company from the cycle of declining profits but I don't think any of us should go so far as to believe that it's OK to lose money when acquiring a customer. Many people believe that it's OK to over-spend on paid search as long as you are "acquiring" a customer. The assumption is that once acquired, the customer will generate a lifetime value that's far more than this first purchase.

I don't believe this for a second. There's a sad truth about someone who finds a website through a search. When the same customer needs something again, they are going to search again! That means new results, new competitors and a new purchase journey. I contend that the cost to re-acquire a repeat customer is probably just as expensive as acquiring them the first time. There was a day when loyalty prevailed, but the power of the internet at the buyers' fingertips allows them to let sellers compete for the sale every single time.

Cannibalizing Paid Search

I love paid search, but more for its data than its profitability. Look past the ability to increase revenue with paid search and into all those rich message, engagement, and competitive insights that you can extract from the data. Our goal here is to use every ounce of that data in an attempt to optimize the organic side and convert a pay-per-click expense into an organic asset.

Moving searchers from the paid side to the organic side makes sense for many reasons:

- **Conversion.** Organic clicks tend to convert higher

- **AOV.** Organic clicks tend to have a higher average order size

- **Expense to Asset.** Organic requires an initial content investment, but there's an opportunity to develop content assets that perform indefinitely.

- **ROI.** The advantages of organic content, if harnessed around profit, should have a more attractive return on investment.

The best place to begin an organic content strategy is within the paid search data. Pursue two primary strategies:

1) Find the keywords that convert the best. Conversion is a measure of efficiency and the ability to connect search-to-sales. To identify the best keywords, use the metric revenue-per-click ($/C). This blends conversion rate and average order size into a single metric and says a lot about both the efficiency and the potential value of an organic visit.

2) Find the best-served keywords. While Google is certainly influenced by money, the more experience that Google has with searchers connecting the site to a keyword, the more confident it will be when it sees content updates and thus hopefully more likely to reward the content for the keyword.

Keyword Competitive Analysis

Once you've cherry-picked the best performing keywords, the next step is to do a keyword competitive analysis. Start searching the terms to understand what the organic competition looks like. Click through to each link and evaluate the quality, engagement level and depth of the content.

Then spend some time evaluating the overall domain. Is it credible? Current? What're the "domain authority" scores? This is useful to compare domain strength. A weaker site trying to displace a stronger site clearly has to deliver a significantly better solution. A successful content strategy thus is unique to every site.

Paid & Organic Search Balance

Most organizations underfund organic strategies and overspend on paid search. The content investment seems to increase with the maturity of the digital marketing team. Organic strategies are harder to do well and take longer to scale revenue, so this makes sense.

There's only one search results page (SERP). It has a top and a bottom and a left and a right and we've all learned that different sections deliver either sponsored or organic. Thus, it makes sense to build a unified strategy that synchronizes the approach between the paid and organic teams. These teams are often organizationally diverse, but that shouldn't get in the way of developing a fully coordinated strategy.

Leverage the paid search data by identifying keywords with paid success and specifically target organic strategies for these words. Consider using these same pages as the landing page for the click-through ad to improve the quality score and decrease the CPC.

Ultimately the balance occurs when everyone understands the profitability and potential for both investments. To balance a company's paid search strategy it's necessary to create appropriate ROI measures that allow teams to compare the return on investment for both strategies and achieve a balanced investment based on each technique's overall profitability.

5

Chapter

Return on Content Spend

Content Measurement Strategies

As a direct marketing data nerd, when Google first unveiled its paid search advertising platform I was in love. The approach allowed a good marketer to precisely dial creative, spend, and segmentation to optimize for success. In other words, we could get to a place where no marketing dollars are ever wasted.

I can't say that balancing ad copy, bidding strategy and keyword identification led to zero waste but the discipline of optimizing the commerce process would quickly emerge. Optimization required the ability to measure outcomes and the outcome I cared about was new revenue. We were handed the tools to build a profit machine that worked in real-time.

Paid search was a data junky's dream.

The Touchy-Feely Strategy

As excited as I was about paid search, I struggled to stay awake when the topic of SEO came up. It lacked everything I loved about eCommerce marketing. It wasn't fast at all. In fact, it was (and is) painfully slow. At a time when I was having a blast bopping to a rock beat, SEO was the equivalent of a slow ballad.

SEO wasn't just slow, the data also was not precise. It was hard to correlate effort with specific business results–the elements you need to measure ROI. As a result, I largely ignored SEO. I spent just enough money on SEO so that I could tell the CEO I was "all over that SEO thing," but truth be told, I viewed SEO as an expense instead of a path to a new profit center.

At the same time, SEO also had its glamorous side. It had one feature that is every marketer's favorite word. It was FREE! And while it really wasn't free, if I could figure out how to scale SEO effectively there might be something there. But it wasn't my priority and was certainly my ugly duckling program.

The first time I put real muscle into driving organic results was at a time when I was desperate. The revenue was soft and for some reason, the tried and true strategies weren't performing the way they had performed in the past. I needed something new to try. I rolled up my sleeves and decided it was time to become enlightened by organic strategies. As I'm sure many before had done, when you want to learn about SEO you should probably Google it! I quickly reminded myself about why I had put it off as I got reacquainted with everything I disliked.

SEO strategies were too "touchy-feely" for me. The strategies were built on a mountain of assumptions and educated guesses instead of hard data and testing. What's more, scaling organic results looked really hard and I had made a career of not working too hard. It dawned on me that because scaling organic success is so hard, that also made it a defensible strategy. In other words, the fact that SEO was a difficult strategy was exactly why it should be a high priority–it would be difficult for competitors to respond and could become a competitive advantage. I was ready to jump in, I felt like I was on a mission to crack the code, but I would definitely have to reshape SEO to look like all the other digital marketing programs we were running.

Adding Decimals to SEO

I knew that I would have to bring the same level of analytics to organic that I brought to paid search. I set out to put more science and data into my SEO strategy.

The first step was to establish a way to measure the ROI of an organic program. At the time I was ranking every marketing program based on a metric I called "cost-per-margin dollar" (CPM$). This was the total cost of a specific program divided by the incremental margin dollars the program delivered. It was essentially the inverse of an ROI, but it was harder to precisely measure the investment and tie that directly to an incremental outcome.

These objections are common to this day:

• How will we know why we got more organic traffic?

• How do you tie the content investment to the organic results?

The truth is that there's an easy way to do just this. It's not unique to eCommerce or digital marketing. In fact, virtually every scientific discipline uses the exact same approach. By employing a control group, it's possible to precisely isolate the incremental benefit of the strategy. What emerged was the metric we called return on content spend (ROCS) as a measure of organic return on investment. A number that was directly comparable to ROAS and other measures of ROI.

ROCS Definition

The R in ROCS stands for RETURN. The return could be either revenue or gross profit dollars, but we typically speak in terms of revenue. Specifically, this R is the <u>incremental</u> return. The CS in ROCS stands for "content spend" and expenses are usually pretty easy to track.

Return on content spend requires establishing a control group. The control group gets no incremental content but is measured as closely as the test groups. The control group, of course, are just similar product categories that get all the other marketing benefits, but just no incremental organic content.

It's not a coincidence that ROCS looks similar to ROAS. It's designed to be an equivalent number to aid in balancing a site's search marketing investment across both paid and organic strategies. Beyond budgeting, return on content spend is the key metric I use to optimize content strategy and find the strongest path to scaling profits.

While they produce comparable results, the approach and the calculation of the two metrics are very different and require some additional details.

ROI ROCS!

Measuring the return on content spend begins with establishing Test and Control product categories. I start by looking at sub-categories and measuring their annual change to identify and then exclude both the "high-fliers" and the "low fliers."

Instead, I pull from everything in between and assume that for testing purposes these are "average" categories. Finally, these categories are randomly assigned to either Test or Control.

After building and publishing the content for the Test categories, then the next step is to analyze the results and measure the incremental lift associated with the organic content.

Analytics Data	Before	After	Lift
Test	$ / Page / Day	$ / Page / Day	Δ
Control	$ / Page / Day	$ / Page / Day	Δ

Net Lift = Test Lift - Control Lift

The table above shows an approach to measuring the incremental benefit or the "net lift." The definition of the Before and After period are based on judgment. Rarely are the Before and After periods the same number of days and thus the need to divide by Day to compare averages for the two periods. Similarly, the Test and Control group rarely has the same number of pages resulting in the need to divide by page to create a per page per day average. The example above specifically calls out Revenue ($) as the primary measure of success, but it's worth performing the same math for gross margins, orders and sessions.

And now it's time to start subtracting! Net Lift equals (Test After – Test Before) – (Control After – Control Before). Net Lift, if positive, shows you something is working and that the content caused it. But we need a few more things before we come away with the R in ROCS.

We are now forced to talk about a couple of fuzzy terms. As much as I love data, the discipline of marketing is all about filling in the gaps between the data. It's our job to see the color even if only presented with a black and white photo. We call these things "assumptions" and these faux facts are certainly

needed but have to be quarantined as something different than pure data. Assumptions when managing a scientific test are important but they should be conservative enough that the results will provide enough confidence to make smart business decisions. Essentially I can't let a lack of precise data slow me down, but I have to manage the risk associated with making an assumption.

I used to wait weeks to understand if a direct marketing program worked and now I'm impatient hours after launching a program wondering if it worked. Search engines are in no rush and they are even more conservative. That means nothing will happen quickly. This is a program that plays out over weeks and months not hours and days.

Think of content like a fine wine that can improve with time. The value of that wine is not viewed through the lens of what it's worth today. Instead, it's viewed through a lens of what is expected upon maturity. A maturity factor can thus be added to the ROCS formula that appreciates that when we look weeks after publishing new content, we are seeing "early results." To measure Return we need to understand the future value.

The most I've ever inflated the Net Lift is 2x to compensate for a lack of maturity because we were looking at numbers just one-month post publishing. In hindsight, this was a very conservative approach and generally, after two months I use a number like 1.1 to appreciate that as Google gathers more user interaction data they are more likely to reward good content.

The second "fuzzy" concern is that we need to estimate the useful life of this content. While paid search is a two-dimensional snapshot, organic content is closer to a movie that plays out over time. Different industries and even different product categories might use a different number to estimate the useful life of organic content.

I generally start with an estimate of 24 months. This is the expectation for how much longer the content is expected to perform at this level. There are absolutely reasons to shorten or lengthen this number, but this is roughly equivalent to the average "age" of the content on Google's page one results.

And that's it! The ROCS formula: ROCS = (Net Lift * Maturity Factor * Useful Life in Months) / Content Spend

ROCS: Beware of Addiction

The power of measuring success can become a bit overwhelming. Content metrics can give you as much insight and flexibility to adjust the strategy as paid search can. Keyword strategies, competitive gap identification, content depth, and other factors when coupled with a ROCS metric will allow any eCommerce data science operation to have lots of new fun understanding how to maximize the incremental return.

There's another benefit in testing content strategies. It's an opportunity to learn something about the customer. Content is the nectar that the prospect bee is seeking and the ROCS methodology allows for an objective evaluation of the quality of that prospect nectar. Hopefully, there is an opportunity for eCommerce companies to learn more about what content customers want to consume in the process and help drive the creative team's efforts to do the same.

Here's where the story gets better. So far, this discussion has focused on the need to drive profitable new organic revenue streams into the company. But the value of good organic content goes much further.

6

Chapter

Site Conversion,
User Engagement & Loyalty

Content's Benefit Beyond Organic

Google has been pretty vocal about how they want us to play the game. We are strongly encouraged to help them connect the search query to the best destination for that search. The answer is clear if you want to succeed in SEO: build the best content.

There was a time when eCommerce sites had virtually no content! Years went by when it was apparently acceptable to have a 50-character product title as the complete description and amazingly that seemed to work. The eCommerce pioneers, however, quickly figured out that buyers are more likely to buy if they have enough information to make a confident purchase decision. Photos and longer descriptions started happening and all of a sudden eCommerce was investing in content.

Late in the game, manufacturers stepped in and decided that they should own funding and creating content, allowing the eCommerce site to worry about other issues. In the process, however, the industry fell into the easy path of "one-size-fits-all" content where every eCommerce site used the same manufacturer-supplied content. eCommerce content got less unique and thus less competitive. Good organic content has a bigger benefit than customer acquisition. Good organic content can help improve all sales through all other channels.

Site Conversion Data

eZdia ran a test with a large eCommerce site that looked at a selection of product categories where we enhanced the pages with unique keyword-optimized content. The goal was to drive

organic traffic, but there was a bigger benefit. The site's overall conversion rate started to rise for the pages with fresh content. That's not the "organic conversion rate" but the total conversion based on all the traffic to the page. The client measured an average improvement from 1.21% to 1.39% while the overall site conversion rate was stable.

Better content is designed to match what people are searching for, answer their questions and move them through to purchase. Effectively, good organic content is designed to wire the buyer and seller interactions together. As I learned in my direct marketing career, when no sales rep is present, it's important to identify the most common objections and proactively raise and overcome those objections even before the customer might think of them. Direct marketers also know that in most cases, longer copy and more content generally beats shorter copy tests. It makes sense that good organic content would help improve conversions.

I subscribe to Google's mission. If we can give customers the maximum amount of information, talk to them like a buyer, address their concerns and give them confidence, then they are more likely to place an order. Good content is the foundation of a successful eCommerce site. And yet few sites set aside a significant budget to invest in better product content.

Sticky

When I see a discussion about the "Google algorithm" I worry people might be confused. The suggestion that there just one Google algorithm is misleading. The way I see it, there are billions of algorithms. Each of us is training Google multiple times a day

about who we are, what we want, how we talk, and what we care about. Google is in the business of trying to develop an algorithm that's customized to each of us.

Somehow the rank tracking services industry seems to ignore this little fact. The software that tells a site where it ranks for a given keyword is determined by a bot crawling Google anonymously. The results are not customized to any one person or their specific search circumstances.

But the goal is to connect with individuals and hold their attention with the content. When I click on a search link, Google starts its stopwatch to time how long I stay away. The assumption being that the longer I stay away from the search page, the more I loved the content and the better it matched my query. Google files that data away and then uses it both to give me more personalized results, but also to optimize the results of others as well.

Engaging a customer is more than just the text, but is a function of the graphics, links, tools and page organization. I often think about what I call the Hansel & Gretel strategy that purposely leaves clickable nuggets of bait throughout the page to pull the reader further and further away from Google and that nasty stopwatch.

Engagement is typically measured in terms of the "time-on-site" or "time-on-page" metrics along with the "bounce rate" metric (the search equivalent of a rejection). But there is another benefit of good organic eCommerce content and that's a better-paid search program. Paid search works on the same principle.

Paid Search Improvement

We've discussed that quality content is an important consideration on the paid search side as well. The way the search engines see it, the better job they do of connecting a search to a paid ad and a useful landing page, the more money they can make. Thus, the same types of quality measures used to drive the organic search results, are used to drive paid search quality. But the search engine typically doesn't reject an ad because of low quality. Instead, they use market forces and simply charge a higher CPC when the match quality to the keyword is lower. Google thus adjusts the pricing based on how relevant the destination is to the keyword phrase.

When sites invest in organic quality content and use those pages as the paid search landing page, they typically can see a corresponding reduction in their average CPCs and improvement in their ROAS. While not a guarantee, this is a common outcome.

This Aint Your Father's Idea of Loyalty

There was a time when we knew the people we purchased from, but the internet gives us the power to choose from an unlimited number of potential sellers and increasingly we buy based on value instead of loyalty or even convenience.

Think about your neighborhood and how many local retailers are struggling as eCommerce grows. I don't think anyone would argue that we are more loyal to eCommerce than our neighbors.

Instead, we are seeing a shift toward a better overall value. I think we are in an age where buyers are less loyal than ever before.

That doesn't mean that there is no loyalty today and I think there is an opportunity for eCommerce sites to develop some level of loyalty. But, don't expect to be anyone's exclusive supplier.

Content is a great way to build on-line loyalty. Great eCommerce content helps give a site a personality, raise trust and create the perception of better overall value. I personally like to take this approach a step further and write content with a unique personality. Instead of reading content that is complete but sterile, I have found loyalty by building personality and a level of honesty into the copy style because for loyalty to happen two ingredients seem critical: trust and a personal relationship. eCommerce companies often struggle to create personal relationships, but one of the easiest ways to do this is to write the same way real people talk: Less formal writing styles and more storytelling.

While I contend that traditional loyalty is dying, I often get the objection that Amazon Prime is evidence to the contrary. I contend that this is a better example of creating a value preference and a habit as opposed to anything approaching loyalty. I think most eCommerce shoppers would happily abandon Amazon if they were aware of a significantly better overall value. Loyalty may well be challenged right now, but demand for convenience is certainly on the rise.

7

Chapter

Prioritization

Organic Product Prioritization Strategies

The truth is that not all products or product categories may be worth an investment in better content. While every site's threshold of profitability may differ, every site will want to score all pages based on the likelihood that the page's performance will profitably respond to a content infusion.

I like to score and rank every page on a site based on its content opportunity. A scoring approach, once developed, is an easy way to continually be investing in content pages with the highest ROCS potential. Here are the factors I use when building a scoring model:

- **Word Count.** In general, the more content on the page, the easier it is for the search engine to determine how best to match the page to a specific search query. While more words aren't always better, this is an easy number to measure and can impact the effectiveness of new content. **Impact:** Fewer words raise the prioritization score.

- **Review Count.** Lots of reviews are an indication of a more active product, with more content and likely better engagement. Pages with lots of reviews typically are not as desperate for content as pages with no reviews. **Impact:** High review count lowers the prioritization score.

- **Keyword Rank.** Identify the top three most likely keywords for the page and understand how well the page ranks for these keywords today. **Impact:** This can either positively or negatively impact a page's potential depending on the results. What drives the score up is a predominance of keywords with results that are within "striking distance" of page one (usually defined as ranks 11 through 20).

- **Organic Trajectory.** The organic trajectory is another metric where the impact can vary. Pages with lots of past traffic that are currently in decline are likely suffering because a competitor has published a stronger result and these pages are ideal for updated content. **Impact:** Pages with declining organic traffic can be excellent content targets.

- **Paid Search Results.** As we've discussed, there is only one search page and the data from the paid side is relevant to the organic side. I look for pages that contain keywords that convert well (conversion rate). **Impact:** Pages with high conversion words get a higher prioritization score.

- **Competition.** Competition can cut two ways. For sites with very strong domain authority, I try to seek out competitors to squash. Sites with lower authority have to play either the strategy that tries to create better content or attempts

to optimize for less popular and less competitive search queries. **Impact:** It depends on where the site is winning or losing the domain authority game.

- **Organic Success**. Pages with existing organic success (traffic, conversions and revenue) are likely to be more trusted and thus they should be more immediately responsive to an incremental content investment. **Impact:** Existing organic success is a positive indicator of future organic success.

The key to page prioritization is to remember that it is <u>not</u> keyword prioritization. We want to think like eCommerce managers and identify the pages that are likely to have the most impact as a result of an organic content investment. While I like to use all of the data listed above, I find myself constantly adjusting the weights and impact of each element as we learn more about what works.

Most product pages today have duplicative content supplied to them by the product manufacturer. That means Google sees a lot of virtually identical information across different sites that sell the same product. The result is that this content offers no specific organic advantage. But the idea of updating content on 100,000 pages and maintaining consistent quality can be daunting.

The words on a website are like the clothes that a company wears. If not done well, poor content quality can negatively impact the overall brand. Scaling content creation can be a challenge so it's important to develop a writing style guide that any professional eCommerce writer can follow. This makes the quality control process a little less subjective and a little more objective.

Content Priorities by Content Type

I typically think about content in terms of its position in the customer's buying journey. "Informational" searches typically line up with long-form content (buying guides or blog posts) while "considerational" content typically lines up with category-level content (both from a site's taxonomy as well as dynamic query-based category pages). Finally, there is "transactional" content designed to connect with searchers who are ready to buy.

Aggregating the individual page scores rolls up into a category score. The highest scoring categories deserve the most emphasis at all levels of the buying journey, while the lower scoring categories might only be appropriate for specific pages and a narrow set of content types. For those high

scoring categories, an integrated approach to informational, considerational and transactional pages can have a cumulative impact that is difficult to create by just investing in a single content type.

Every site is different and the use of different types of content is one of the most important things to test as a site builds its content strategy.

8
Chapter

Building a
Content Strategy

What's Your Product Content Strategy?

Most people I speak with don't know how to answer the question, "What is your product content strategy?"

A content strategy is simply the approach a website uses to build content designed to achieve the site's content goals. For a given keyword, looking at the content delivered for the page one results in some detail should help an analyst understand what it will take for new content to displace the existing result. You'll want to look at the content, the keywords it's optimized for and the overall strength of the domain. Take that a step further and see if you can understand the competitors' overall content strategy and look for gaps that can be exploited with a better targeted and more robust page. At least that's the way it works on paper.

There are hundreds of elements that could go into a content strategy. I typically start with developing a target word count. While Google doesn't expressly care about the number of words on a page, the more words the more opportunity there is to convince Google that your content is worthy of page one and keep any competitors at bay. But a good content strategy will consider many elements.

- **Word Count.** How many words are on the page one results today? That's probably a good place to start.

- **Domain Authority.** A site with a very high domain authority quite frankly doesn't have to work as hard to get top ranking. Lesser sites should consider producing more robust content than other sites.

- **Keyword Density.** I typically assume that 3 to 5 keywords is plenty for a single page. Much more than this and there is the risk of writing too broadly and the search engines might see a lack of focus for a specific query. If a site, however, is struggling to get noticed, then it makes sense to either find the path less traveled or expand the use of keywords to 5 to 10 to see if a broader approach does a better job of appealing to long-tail searches.

- **Linking Strategy.** There is a lot of discussion around external links. If you can get a strong site to link to your site from a relevant page and using anchor text that is relevant to the landing page, then Google is impressed. But manufacturing these external linkages as a strategy can be very frustrating. It's possible to acquire links that have little or no practical value. On the other hand, internal linking is quite easy to accomplish and while not as effective as an external link, clearly has an impact. A good content strategy includes an internal linking strategy.

- **No-Follow Content.** Sometimes removing content from your site map is the best way to get search engines to focus on what you want them to. While it may seem counter-intuitive to give up on specific products, if they aren't performing, then the site might be better off using Google's valuable time to pay attention to the most important pages.

- **Speed.** When developing a content strategy be careful about getting too crazy on the graphics. Site speed today is more important than ever in terms of winning the organic content wars. While everyone wants a good-looking website, as an eCommerce site the overall speed may be more important than ultra-high-resolution images.

eCommerce site speed should average something less than 4 seconds and 2 seconds is ideal. The bottom line is that page speed and graphics are an important part of your content strategy.

It's a Search Journey

The right content strategy appreciates that different content is required at different stages of the purchase, along with competing to stay relevant to the searcher throughout their search journey. Search marketing is a competitive endeavor. Whether you are bidding on paid search slots or investing in organic content, you are competing with your industry's very best.

All the rules of marketing apply to this competition. What makes the site unique? What value does the site offer the target searcher? How does the site connect to the way the searcher searches? It turns out that these are hard questions to answer, but finding the answers is exactly the type of competitive advantage most sites need.

There is no magic formula beyond starting with a reasonable hypothesis about what it will take to succeed. Then, implement and measure carefully. Try to discover through the data ways to improve upon the original hypothesis and see if these adjustments improve the results. The journey of optimizing a content strategy is something that never really ends.

9

Chapter

Conclusions

Search Marketing's Place
in Marketing History

When I was learning the craft of marketing in the 1980s (long before eCommerce) it was already obvious that there was a problem in the industry. Through much of the 50s and 60s marketing was largely based on someone's judgment. My business-school program was filled with examples where that judgment was wrong, and we were taught marketing with much more emphasis on data to find the best approach.

John Wanamaker, whose department stores would become Macy's, is famous for saying, "Half the money I spend on advertising is wasted; the trouble is I don't know which half." This historically was a laugh line for many marketers and was embraced by most as a "given" for marketing. While Wanamaker died in 1922, today's digital marketing world allows us to understand not just what's working and what isn't, but also how to improve what's working and make it even better. It feels possible to achieve zero waste with today's ability to measure.

In the 70s and 80s, the direct marketers were leading the way toward precise measurement with carefully controlled A/B testing to understand precisely what's working. And in the 90s, all of that got sped up with its transition from paper to electronic as we moved into the eCommerce era. Today we can segment customers with a precision we never thought possible. Most modern marketing teams can measure the ROI of every program and are continually making adjustments designed to maximize it.

But in the early days of eCommerce, SEO was seen as the digital equivalent to something that Harry Potter might have referred

to as a Dark Art. Most of us with a few decades of experience under our belt have been hurt by Google or know someone who has. We're all familiar with the helplessness it creates and most of us will do everything possible to avoid that outcome in the future.

Today while the fear still exists for many, the industry is more mature and stable than ever. Today the risks of avoiding SEO are higher than the risks of investing in search optimization. And yet most eCommerce companies still approach search engine optimization with enormous delicacy. Hiring an SEO expert and funding regular blog posts is not a sufficient content strategy in today's competitive eCommerce industry.

The Future of eCommerce Content

Search engine optimization and eCommerce content are likely to look very different in our future. Google is busy trying to collect more and more data about us and they plan to use it to anticipate our every query. Search engines will increasingly "get you," maybe even better than you get yourself. Frankly, I see examples of this every day and there's no reason it won't improve going forward.

Voice search, artificial intelligence, 5G cellular networks and lots of other technologies will impact this industry, as will the governments around the world actively writing laws designed to balance the costs and benefits of sharing all of this personal data.

What won't change is that all companies need to anticipate the customers' needs and be there one step ahead with the product even before the customers know they need something. Technology by itself can't drive success. SEO is front-line marketing at its best and the sites that win are those that understand their customers the best.

I ran a focus group once years ago with a room full of professional buyers. These are the people who make purchases for a living. They have to justify their purchases based on factors like price, availability, support, and a myriad of other requirements. Sometimes they ask vendors to compete against each other and presumably select the seller that offers the most value. These professionals are highly organized, methodical, logical and typically don't make "impulse" purchases.

At least that's what I've always thought! To be sure, many professional buyers would identify with the description above, but that's not what I heard as I watched the focus group from the room behind a one-way mirror.

I was sitting off to the side just inches from the glass as I listened to the discussion coming over the speaker system. We had asked the researcher to press hard on WHY people select specific vendors. She was specifically instructed to not accept the first answer but to dig deeper.

We may have tried to dig a little too deep because after a few minutes one woman got frustrated by the relentless questioning. She took control of the group by answering for the room (9 other participants). While the rest of the room nodded in agreement, this woman swizzled in her seat and turned to face me and I swear she was staring directly into my eyes (through the mirror) to make sure I got it, "we buy from people we like."

Wow! Nothing to do with numbers or data and everything to do with the interpersonal relationships that get developed along the way. eCommerce is no different. Content is all about building a relationship with prospective customers. We've discussed the decline in loyalty that might block the competitors. While loyalty means something different today, no one buys from companies that they don't like. Most employees, even professional purchasers, are more worried about making a mistake than driving their organization's success, so trust, confidence and safety are significant considerations. The riskier the purchase the more important liking the supplier is.

The future of search marketing will bring lots of changes to search but no technology is going to change the fact that exceptional product content goes a long way toward making the sale. Organic content builds trust. Organic content helps build customer relationships and eCommerce sites should approach better content in a way that is most likely to win in the hearts and the minds of its customers.

About the Author

Greg Harris likes to think he has been specializing in eCommerce for more than 35 years. While nothing close to eCommerce existed 35 years ago, Greg specialized in direct marketing early in his career where getting orders without a sales rep was always the goal. When eCommerce technology finally arrived, Greg didn't miss a beat and has since built and managed three different technology eCommerce sites and has consulted for dozens more. Along the way, he started experimenting with organic content strategies that delivered huge success. That's when he realized that much of the eCommerce universe was doing everything wrong. Today, Greg is the Vice President of Strategic Services for eZdia, Inc. and trying to help the eCommerce community approach SEO and Content in a more thoughtful way.

About eZdia, Inc.

eZdia was founded in 2012 when it became clear that technical SEO optimization was not going to be enough. The company built the world's largest network of professional eCommerce writers and manages that network through its CrewMachine content optimization platform. The approach allows eCommerce companies to effectively scale content production. Before companies can scale, however, they first need to build a content strategy. eZdia developed the metrics Return on Content Spend (ROCS), which is the equivalent of the paid search ROAS metric, and by employing these metrics can help eCommerce companies build more profitable customer acquisition strategies by optimizing their content and conversion strategies.

Today the company develops content you can measure for companies like Amazon, Walmart, Staples, Lowe's and other large eCommerce sites.

Today's Search Engine Optimization strategies focus on improving search visibility, but eCommerce sites around the world are focused on something very different—eCommerce sites focus on selling stuff and making money. Search optimization for eCommerce sites requires rethinking all the traditional SEO techniques.

eCommerce Growth Without Advertising explains how to adapt traditional SEO strategies for the specific objectives of eCommerce sites.

eCommerce Growth Without Advertising describes how to put the ROI into SEO with techniques for precisely measuring the cost of incremental organic revenue (instead of just incremental visits).

eCommerce Growth Without Advertising explains why the paid search return on ad spend (ROAS) is down, what organic can learn from paid search and how to solve the ROAS problem.

eCommerce Growth Without Advertising demonstrates that original organic product content has benefits well beyond lowering customer acquisition costs.

eCommerce Growth Without Advertising describes a detailed approach that can help any eCommerce marketing team recalibrate its organic search programs for the needs of an eCommerce site.

www.ezdia.com