

SiteVisibility “Think-Paper”

**Are you getting your  
SEO right for your  
e-commerce website?**

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**think**  
*beyond*  
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# Are you getting your SEO right for your e-commerce website?

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Whether you're a 'pure-play' online retailer or taking a 'bricks and mortar' business 'digital' you will no doubt be investing in some kind of natural search engine marketing and optimisation. But are you spending your hard earned marketing budget on the most cost effective search techniques? Has your agency or search engine optimisation (SEO) team chosen the strategies with the longevity to still be providing results eighteen months down the line?

In this whitepaper I share some of the most interesting SEO tactics which I have used on e-commerce sites. I highlight some of the over-arching trends that will influence the way you promote your website, to do better in natural search results.



## Quick SEO wins for e-commerce websites

Not everyone has the luxury of reworking or re-launching their e-commerce site when they realise that they have made SEO oversights or have identified a new opportunity that wasn't available at the time of the last redesign. Or maybe you are doing everything right but need that little extra push to overtake a competitor in the rankings?

In this first section I'll present a few instantly actionable ideas that will give your natural search traffic and sales a real boost.

### Use PPC Ads to Inspire Meta Descriptions

The chances are that at some point you've invested in a paid search campaign on Google, Yahoo and Bing. If you've ran a well managed campaign it will have delivered plenty of good quality visitors and no doubt sales too. But there is a way you can benefit even more from the money lining the search engines' pockets.

We often recommend integrating SEO and PPC tactics when talking to clients and in our experience one of the quickest wins of integration is using your successful adverts to inspire the 'meta descriptions' for your natural search listings.

Meta descriptions are one of the hardest working but most underappreciated elements of an SEO campaign. Search for any keyword and on the results



page you'll see two lines of copy below the blue clickable link. These snippets can be tailored using your 'meta description' tag. This content is really valuable SERP real estate and you need to make that content work hard to get the 'click' and a visitor on to your site.

If you have tested numerous content and call to action angles on your paid search campaign you will have real knowledge about what your customers want to click on when they search. Take the content/message that drives the highest quality clicks from your PPC campaign and apply it to your meta description on your website.

## Show Your Product Feed Some Love

Too many online retailers set up a product feed which is syndicated through *Google Product* search and then forget about it. Ask whoever is dealing with your natural search how much time they have spent on this recently?

Your analytics will show you just how important your product feed is to sales and revenue, so make sure it gets the attention it deserves. If Google senses a commercial intent in a keyword search it typically triggers its product content in the search results. If someone is making that kind of search then that is where you need to invest some of your resources and make an appearance.



## Incentivise Repeat Customers to Link

Google's algorithm may get more complex every year but one thing that will never change is its citation model. Google believes that the most trusted sites on the web are those that are mentioned or linked to the most frequently, by the most authoritative websites. The problem is that link building is hard work.

However, if you already have a community of people who believe in your service enough to buy from you repeatedly, they are prime candidates to link to your website.

These incentives can work in different ways. Perhaps you could produce a widget which allows them to syndicate your most link-worthy content, or create an SEO-friendly affiliate scheme, or maybe an old fashioned polite request will work! But why spend time trying to build links with people who don't know about your site when you have an engaged audience at your fingertips? Save your time and work with people who are far more likely to act as brand advocates.

## Use Your Imagery to Build Links

In a recent presentation about [punching above your weight in e-commerce](#) I touched on a theme which I think many retailers would be wise to explore – using their imagery as a link building tool.

The spread of user-generated content has been great for written text and video about products, but still imagery is light years behind.

This is your opportunity; have more photos than all your competitors, vary them from the manufacturers' stock images and encourage people to use them on their own site. It may cost you a few pence in bandwidth but the links will be priceless.

Invest in pack shots and your own unique photography, it will help your conversions and revenue per customer and can also be used as a link building campaign in its own right.

## Make your product pages unique

Gone are the days when Google and other search engines make drastic updates that send shockwaves through their index. Nowadays, there is a stream of near constant updates, most of which are hard if not impossible to detect. However, there was one recent change that might be having a significant impact on your company's bottom line.

Known within the industry as the "May-Day Update" this change robbed many sites of their long-tail traffic to internal pages. Not every website lost out though, those with unique product descriptions, multi-media content and user reviews have thrived.

No longer can you rely on building trust in your domain and rely on boiler-plate manufacturer descriptions to fill your product pages.

## How to make personalised search an opportunity not a threat

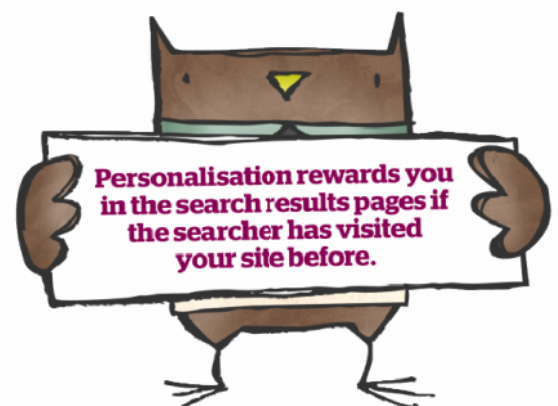
All sites face challenges and opportunities with changes to the Google Algorithm. This includes the fact that [personalised search is default for all browsers](#).

Now every click from a search result is influencing future search results.

If you are selling a product online, you have really got to take advantage of the opportunity this presents. Here are a few suggestions for how e-commerce websites, like yours, can use personalisation to their benefit.

## Off Topic Visits Aren't a Bad Thing

Generally we want our traffic to be as close to our site's main proposition as possible but personalisation changes this approach slightly. In its most simple implementation personalisation rewards you in the search engine results pages (SERPs) if the searcher has visited your site before.



So, to do well in the natural search results, you want to get potential customers to visit your site, even if they aren't looking to purchase something. This means producing non-commercial content that people will find in the search results.

Of course, the closer this is to your core theme the better. If you're selling gadgets to under twenty five year-old men your content needs to appeal to these people, but if you have a great idea which will attract attention but it's a bit 'left-field', go with it.

And if you think about it carefully, this type of content might attract links, which as you know is great for your rankings, personalised or not.

## Encourage Branded Search Traffic

It is very unlikely that the volume of branded keyword traffic will ever be a strong algorithmic factor on its own as it is too easy to manipulate. Having said that, I don't think there's any harm in encouraging branded navigational searches to your site.

If you are doing offline advertising, experiment with calls to action like 'search for brand x', if you own those natural and paid results. It is going to be a good signal to the search engine of your brand's importance.

## Reduce Your Bounce Rate

Another piece of usage data that I would be very surprised if Google aren't using to personalise results is bounce rates. Google's aim is to get people to the content they want, ideally by clicking one of their sponsored listings!

If certain key phrases have high bounce rates then you might want to consider reducing your search visibility for those terms, as they could potentially be harming the rankings for your other closely related terms that you are trying to rank well for.

Besides, reducing bounce rates should be at the top of your to do list anyway. You've invested a great deal of time and effort in getting those people to your site only to lose them after just one page is a missed opportunity.

## Have an Extensive Paginated FAQ

Most websites have a frequently asked questions section or glossary section. This unique useful content should be a goldmine for search engine entry pages which will help you on personalised commercial terms, but too many companies aren't taking full advantage of the power of this content.



If you like the sound of this idea, you might enjoy a blog post we wrote about "[How to Turn Your Glossary into a Long Tail Search Marketing Machine](#)"

## Make Your Support Queries Public

People having problems with their current products are potential future customers. Getting them to your site as soon as possible should be a top priority. So have pages dealing with faults and problems, offer advice on how to solve them even if you only sell alternative products.

That might not lead to a sale in the short term, but if someone is unsatisfied or has a faulty product they are likely to be looking for a replacement.

## Get the Full Benefit of Your Reviews

Most e-commerce sites have 'reviews' functionality in some shape or form, but many of them haven't been [managing their user generated reviews for the maximum SEO benefit](#).

There seems to be no let-up in the rising search queries on phrases like 'product reviews,' 'best product' etc. But too many companies make the mistake of hosting their reviews off-site or not using SEO best practice to get the pages indexed by the SERPs.

It normally only takes a few small tweaks in your system to get the full benefit.



# 17 Issues your SEO team should have solved

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If you have a team working on your SEO there are a few issues common to all e-commerce websites which they really should have under control. Here is a check-list you can run through to make sure everything is working as it should be:

## HTML Navigation

It is vital for SEO to have a textual html navigation system which is easy for search engines to understand. Relying on image or flash navigation can cause search engine spiders to have trouble navigating the site and indexing all your pages with keyword rich content.

## Ability To Manually Edit Title Tags

Title tags are the strongest on page signal a webmaster has to indicate the theme and keywords they wish to rank for. Many e-commerce systems create title tags automatically based on database fields. To carry out effective SEO you need the ability to edit these tags manually.

## Ability To Manually Edit Meta Descriptions

Meta descriptions are the snippet of text triggered in a search engine results page. Therefore you need the ability to manually and independently optimise these tags to contain keywords and encourage searchers to click on your listing.

## SEO Friendly URLs

URLs have a very important role in both usability and search engine optimisation. Typically database driven websites have very poor URL structures which aren't search friendly. Best practice dictates a search friendly default and a manual editing ability.

## Automatic Site Maps

For complex site architectures with hundreds or thousands of pages you can increase the likelihood of all your content being indexed by the search engines by providing a XML site map, ideally this should be an automatic process.

## Avoid Duplication

Duplication, where very similar content is available on different URLs, this can come in various different forms. The best e-commerce platforms avoid these problems.

## Ability To Use Canonical Tag

The "Rel-Canonical Tag" can be used to mitigate essential duplication, i.e. when a product is in two categories etc. This tag allows you to specify where the version of the page you want is in the search index.

## Ability To Set Up 301 Redirects Within CMS

When a page is removed from your site that receives traffic or links you will want to redirect that traffic to the next best page. A 301 redirect is the most search engine friendly way of doing this. This can be done by editing the ".htaccess" file.

## Landing Page URL Editing

When creating a landing page for PPC or SEO you will want to be able to manually specify the most search engine friendly URL you can. Some e-commerce platforms allow you to specify these URLs when creating a page.

## Micro Format Support

Though not a high priority at the moment for most SEO's micro-formats like "hReview" are a great way to improve click through rates from natural search, additionally as Google begins to support the "hProduct" micro-format this will become an important part of any e-commerce system's specification.

## Ability To Edit "H" Tags Within CMS

Heading tags are one of the most important on-page elements of search engine optimisation, for search best practice you should be able to independently and manually create and edit heading tags including h1, h2 etc.

## Google Product Feed Support

Google Product Search is based on feeds and is one of the most cost effective ways to drive natural search traffic to an online retail site. Ideally e-commerce platforms will be able to automatically export your catalogue into a format which can be accepted by Google Product search.

## Rules For Dynamic Title Tags And Meta Descriptions

It's not feasible to create manual title tags and Meta descriptions for every page and product on your site; however it is desirable to build these tags based on some dynamic keyword logic.

## Custom 404 Error Pages

Having custom 404 pages is a usability and search marketing concern. Some platforms will allow you to quickly edit these pages as easily as you would any product or service.

## Dynamic Linking Between Product Pages

Cross linking or cross selling is a great way to ensure your site is effectively indexed by the search engines. Some platforms allow for automatic cross linking based on product categorisation.

## Are You Dealing With Category Pagination Well?

Many of your categories will have listings which will take several pages. The contents of these pages may well be very similar in content and mark up to all the other pages in the categories. This isn't desirable as it causes SEO duplication.

## Avoiding Session IDs

Session IDs can be indexed by search engines and can cause the engines to see duplicate versions of a page. Therefore, session IDs are best avoided for users and search engine spiders.

## About the author:

### Kelvin Newman (Creative Director)

Kelvin Newman has responsibility for R&D and maintaining the SiteVisibility web presence, including our No.1 ranking Podcast and Blog. Prior to joining SiteVisibility, Kelvin worked for Emap consumer media working across high profile magazine titles. In addition to this experience and client work Kelvin regularly produces popular search and digital marketing whitepapers and has also delivered speaker sessions at leading industry events.

## About SiteVisibility:

SiteVisibility brings a team of search engine marketing & optimisation, social media, strategy, technical and R&D boffins together to create flexible, future-proof and truly integrated digital marketing campaigns that deliver better results from sensible budgets.



## Client Portfolio:



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