

INTERNET RETAILING



SELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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AMAZON UK REVIEW

Internet Retailing asked 4 retail experts to take a look at Amazon UK and give readers insight into the company's retail strategy, site performance, usability and customer experience. We only have room for a synopsis in the magazine – visit InternetRetailing.net for more, in depth coverage and to voice your opinion.

RETAIL STRATEGY

Ray Fowler, Retail Consultant, CVL

The recent celebration of Valentine's Day highlights the importance of relationships and as I perused the various online sites offering gifts for loved ones I reflected, probably quite sadly, on my life with Amazon and why I love what they bring to the internet.

Amazon continues to be:

- Dependable: you know where you are and you feel safe and secure.
- Comprehensive: a huge range of products, always easy to find and usually in stock. No other 'conventional retailer' site can match the choice (although I recognise that Play.com - with 7m products now - is fast approaching).
- Competitive: slightly cheaper prices may be found elsewhere - but Amazon has lower priced options around 'new or used' and other additional discounts.
- Simple and speedy: the overall experience is second to none in simplicity and '1-click ordering' makes the checkout experience unbeatable.
- Joined up: delving deeper into its capabilities - if you are shopping on the US site and want to send products to a US address the system will 'know' that you are ordering from the UK and organise everything accordingly.
- Delivery: again, quick, secure and dependable.

So what does Amazon need to do next to take our relationship to the next level?

Even my cold consultant's heart has a problem creating a list of 'multi-channel could-do-better'.

That said, I still experience frustration around inappropriate product recommendations. For example toy brands that children have long since abandoned are still recommended two years down the line.

However, I do love the incongruity of some recommendations. Recently, when I bought 'Sir Alan Sugar - The Biography' I was urged to buy 'Guerrilla Warfare by 'Che' Guevara'

Sorting out these comparatively small nuances will only increase customer retention and loyalty and ensure that Amazon and I reach our silver anniversary together.

USABILITY

Lorraine Paterson, Usability Consultant, User Vision

In usability terms, Amazon is often referenced by experts as providing examples of good practice. Being voted most inspirational retailer in the Internet Retailing Inspiration Index has proved that Amazon is very successful in harnessing its user experience to drive sales. Although some may accuse Amazon of being quite a cluttered and busy website, there are a number of individual design elements which are useful and time saving for customers.

The reason for Amazon's success is largely down to its design strategy. Instead of overhauling the entire design every couple of years, it makes smaller, incremental changes which improve on the current system or add more functionality. In addition, the company listens to the people most important to Amazon - its customers. The last design update early last year was highlighted to visitors using a link on the homepage; "We've had a redesign. Take a look". Here Amazon highlighted and annotated the various alterations and explained the features and benefits. Crucially a form was provided for visitors to feedback their opinions on the new modifications. When users are included in the process of improving the website, they can take ownership over changes and feel that their voice is valued.

The most significant characteristic of the Amazon redesign was that it only made a few revisions and of those, only one could be considered major. Designing this way removes the risk of adversely affecting the user experience. This iterative method provides customers with bite-sized changes which are easier to digest than a complete redesign.

Companies often make the mistake of doing this which not only costs a lot of money but also forces customers to 're-learn' how to use the website. If you remove the familiarity of a website then people are more likely to get frustrated, give up and go elsewhere.

EYE TRACKING ANALYSIS

Guy Redwood, Managing Director, SimpleUsability

The participants of our research showed that when using Amazon.co.uk they had to use different navigation strategies depending on what they were looking for. Amazon's diversified product range has resulted in a more complicated structure with users having to adapt to understand the categories in order to successfully find a product. Overall the site performed well, apart from some serious frustrations with the menu structure.

Our testers were asked to find a book as a gift for a child that they knew and also to buy a replacement kettle for their home. Users were allowed to naturally carry out the tasks and eye tracking data was collected using a non-invasive eye tracking monitor.

Users were very quickly drawn to the left hand navigation or to the top search box with an even split between these two starting points. Users alternated between the two depending on the product that they were looking for.

'Books' is the top category on the left hand side, so users often looked to this title in the left hand navigation. Many users clicked on 'Books', expecting to be taken to the book section, eye tracking showed us that many failed to notice the sub-menu which had appeared to the right of this title, which required the user to click on another title called 'Books'.

When using the left hand navigation to find a replacement kettle, some users clicked 'Home and Garden' then 'Appliances', and others clicked into 'Kitchen and Dining' or 'Electronics'. Many users searched for the word 'kettle' from the top search box, but only a few noticed the suggested terms that appeared below the search box as they typed. The top blank search box was a visually strong device, attracting a lot of attention from users.

When looking for a suitable book, users were quickly drawn to the book titles and if a lot were displayed on a page, the user relied on the left hand navigation to filter the selection by age group. In contrast, when looking for a kettle, users scanned the page using the thumbnail photographs to make initial selections. Sorting by type of kettle was not always available to the user because it was dependent on the route they had taken to their current page.

SITE PERFORMANCE

David Flower, Vice President, EMEA, Gomez

After reviewing the 13 month trending data to February 2009 for Amazon.co.uk's website, one can only describe the performance as disappointingly slow. From the internet backbone (eg ISPs), there was a doubling in average download time from January 2008 when it was 2.4 seconds through September 2008 when it rose dramatically to 4.8 seconds. It recovered slightly towards the end of the year but download times for January and February 2009 increased sharply showing an ominous return to bad form.

Drilling down into the mid January to mid February figures, the performance of the site from the last mile - ie actual desktop connections which show real-life online customer experience - was not much better. In fact, when compared to other websites in Gomez's retail benchmark, it was very poor, lagging way behind other major retail sites. The average download time, including all the information below the fold, was 12.7 seconds. (This reflects total load time not necessarily perceived load time.)

At the end of the period, Amazon.co.uk ended up in the bottom half of the Gomez UK retail benchmark, showing that the site is providing end-users with an inconsistent, and likely frustrating, performance experience.

On a positive note, the Amazon.co.uk site successfully loaded on all the major browsers as well as on major mobile devices. This is an important factor to test for because of the increasing number of web browsers available (Microsoft's Internet Explorer owned virtually the entire browser market until a few years ago but Firefox, Safari, Google Chrome and a host of others are catching up fast). Web pages can look and perform differently from one browser to another.

Clearly Amazon has invested heavily to ensure its site performs on all the major browsers. However, the speed and consistency of the site is likely to be a real let down for its customers.

STAR RATING MADE UP AS FOLLOWS;

Availability on last mile:

3 points out of a maximum of 20

Response time on last mile:

4 points out of a maximum of 20

Consistency on backbone:

6 points out of a maximum of 20

Competitiveness on backbone:

0 points out of a maximum of 20

Browser/mobile support:

20 points out of a maximum of 20

All performance data refers to non-cached pages.