

INTERNET RETAILING



SELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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HOUSE OF FRASER REVIEW

Internet Retailing asked 4 retail experts to take a look at houseoffraser.co.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

House of Fraser launched its transactional website in September 2007.

The website clearly mirrors House of Fraser stores on the high street offering lots of brand names in the Clothing, Home, Furniture and Electricals departments.

There are very clear and easily navigable search options to find what you're looking for (many "Exclusive to House of Fraser") and the Clearance aspect of the site is particularly well sign-posted featuring the wonderfully-named "Tempting Offers".

As for multi-channel retailing (MCR), products are referenced with a Telesales code and a banner advertises "You call, we'll deliver" featuring a telephone number with call times. There is also a 'multi-channel' wedding list service.

Most goods ordered online can be returned to any store and either swapped/refunded immediately. If you want a refund you'll receive eVouchers to spend online. In addition their standard gift vouchers can also be used in store or online.

Further initiatives could include the facility to collect online purchases in store, have in-store purchases delivered to your home and receive 'product in stock' updates via email or SMS. Free delivery could also be considered (currently £4 for orders under £50).

Underpinning further MCR development should be strategic thinking about their market(s) and competitive stance. For example, the ASOS and Boden fashion-related sites excel at product navigation and display whereas generalist Argos leads in efficiency and execution of multi-channel (in areas such as electrical and homewares).

Furthermore, John Lewis offers free delivery on all orders and Marks & Spencer has an exemplary integrated order management system - and both have superb customer service. And if that wasn't enough, Debenhams is in a very similar market

space with a good online offering.

It will be interesting to see how House of Fraser continues to shape up to the challenges ahead.

USABILITY

Mark Westwater, Senior Usability Consultant, User Vision

With 62 UK and Ireland locations, the House of Fraser department group is one of the best known retailers both on the high street and also online.

Its website is successful in not only providing similar access to a massive range of products and brands but there are also a number of features to assist with the sales process.

For example, its 'zoom' and multi-view facilities are helpful but the usefulness is limited by the implementation.

The zoom in and out controls are very small and a reset option denoted by an 'X' is an approach not often encountered. Users can zoom into unnecessary levels and the increased image size impacts the supporting text readability. The 'drag' option, however, is helpful and is supported by very high resolution images.

Multi-views like 'inside the handbag' are inconsistently provided. This is also true of the option to see how the bag looks on a human. Whilst this is a relatively novel solution, as it isn't a consistent resource, it is not likely to increase sales.

On the homepage a carousel feature follows the current trend for ecommerce websites but again the implementation appears incomplete. It can be overlooked and there are no controls to affect the active image.

Similar to Amazon, the 'recently viewed' feature is a helpful navigational aid that creates a 'my products' style section. Unfortunately this list is limited to nine products. Had a carousel approach been taken a larger list could have been maintained.

Given the economic climate House of Fraser are doing all they can to promote their products in helpful and novel ways. Further consideration to

some of the usability issues will assist the site visitors and provide solutions that will help House of Fraser stand out from the crowd.

EYE TRACKING ANALYSIS

**Guy Redwood, Managing Director,
SimpleUsability**

We asked participants to find a gift on the House of Fraser website. From the homepage, eye tracking showed us that users were attracted to the main rotating graphic. These panels were predominantly targeted at women, so the variety of products available was not immediately obvious to all users. Once into a section, users normally needed to scroll before viewing the second line of products. One user actually complained about the 'excessive' scrolling, as she worked her way through the screens of hand bags.

Users experienced particular difficulty when looking for a product that was contained within a section with multiple categories. One user was looking for some cufflinks and browsed from 'Gifts for him' to the 'Cufflinks, belts and ties' section. There were 302 products available in this section, but there was no way for users to narrow down their search to just cufflinks, so the user was forced to page through all the results. Filtering by the colour 'silver' helped bring up a few cufflinks, but the user could not be confident that they had seen all the products.

It became apparent from the unsettled eye movements that users became confused when unexpected items appeared within categories. The only two products in the women's gloves section were actually belts and the clearance gift vouchers and cards section only contained flip flops. This made participants question whether they were in the correct place and quickly eroded confidence in the navigation.

Some users hunted for the search box, as it was not immediately obvious because it was pre-filled in with text and a grey fill. Users who failed when browsing for a product often resorted to the search to find a product. When a user searched for 'cufflinks', they got 308 results, with the first two products listed being belts - which added to the confusion.

When accessing the product information page for a particular product, we observed that users were quickly drawn to, and distracted by, the related items and the 'more from this brand' tab for the actual product. This often distracted users away from their original purchase. This type of page sometimes included a device that contained a scroll bar. Users found it very difficult to scan the supporting text for the product because of this.

Overall, users loved the high quality, zooming photography and the overall feel of the site, but

were then annoyed by the unnecessary scrolling and common errors in merchandising.

SITE PERFORMANCE

David Flower, Vice President, EMEA, Gomez

Gomez monitored the House of Fraser homepage for a 10-day period during late July and early August. The page and page object performance and availability was measured from Gomez's Last Mile and Backbone peer network within the UK. Gomez also used its cross browser compatibility tool to check the compatibility of the homepage from major browsers and mobile devices.

During the monitoring period, key performance issues were detected from major UK internet data centres. These had a serious "knock-on" effect on the site's Last Mile performance - in other words, how the pages were experienced in the real-world by House of Fraser's customers.

From UK Internet Backbone nodes the average homepage download time for the review period was 3.5 seconds, slightly slower than average of 2.6 seconds recorded in the Gomez UK Retail Benchmark. It was, however, way below Tesco - the benchmark's top performer which averaged less than half a second download time.

Major issues were detected from the backbone monitoring at around 1.00pm on one of the monitored days. This showed that only the page HTML was downloaded and none of the other page objects were served. This meant that the page was not available during a critical lunchtime period of a working week.

From the Last Mile perspective, the House of Fraser homepage took over twice as long to download (8.5 seconds) compared to the Internet Backbone download time. It's not all bad news though because this was still way ahead of the 18.9 second Last Mile average for the Gomez UK Retail benchmark.

From an availability perspective, the issues detected from the Internet Backbone may have had an impact on the Last Mile availability. This was particularly low at 93.29% and way below the benchmark average. If extrapolated over a full year it would mean that the site was unavailable for 24.5 days.

Finally, on a more positive note, the site rendered correctly to most major browser/mobile devices with the exception of some Blackberry devices.

HOUSE OF FRASER