

INTERNET RETAILING



SELLING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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DABS.COM: OPPORTUNITIES IN A DOWNTURN

Neil Catto, Financial Director of Dabs.com –
on growing a single-digit-margin electricals business

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CRUNCH

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YOUR M&S

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The Christmas
FIGURES revealed

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MARKS & SPENCER REVIEW



Internet Retailing asked 4 retail experts to take a look at Marks and Spencer.com 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 freezing cold of January 2009 has brought with it difficult times for the UK's retail industry. Retail giant Marks and Spencer is one of the latest to announce disappointing Christmas sales figures, store closures and job cuts, but is there light at the end of the tunnel for the company? Yes there is - and it will all come down to good old-fashioned customer service (with a modern twist).

With its renowned incorporated returns policy and integrated customer service, M&S really is still the 'King of Service'. All customer orders, irrespective of how they are made, are all accessible from one single customer contact point, and customers are able to track orders online, change and cancel them up to the point of despatch. All of this means that customers benefit from the clear, informative and helpful service that we have come to expect from the brand.

So where next in improving M&S's offer, and what should they be developing as part of their propositions?

The obvious move is to leverage the retail stores by developing customer collection points, and creating the opportunity for those stores restricted by ranges to allow customers to order the wider ranges in-store. Enabling either home delivery or in store collections of ordered stock would ensure continued integration with the existing customer experience through the customer contact approach.

For a long while, M&S stores have had the ability to look up product codes and order from each other, and incorporating this into their customer service strategy

would strengthen their position of consumer trust. M&S Magazine, currently a charged magazine, could also be incorporated into a free catalogue to widen the stores' offer.

Developing these propositions and building a virtuous circle between online and offline channels will almost certainly drive gains in M&S's customer share in these uncertain times.

USABILITY

Lorraine Paterson, Usability Consultant, User Vision

Marks and Spencer's website is not the worst example of a site with usability issues. In fact there are many examples of good usability. However, no website is ever perfect and there are always things that a company can do to improve their customers' online experience.

Trust is always an important issue in ecommerce and it does influence a customer's decision to buy. In line with many other leading ecommerce sites, M&S has recently started to harness the power of customer reviews. However, to leave a review you are required to login. From a user's perspective, this is an unnecessary extra step. It may also imply that a review cannot be posted anonymously which can be off-putting.

Product information is also quite cluttered making it more difficult for customers to identify the calls to action. While suggesting alternative items increases cross-selling opportunities, it is important that these additional messages do not have a negative impact. Detailed product information is more difficult to find and is hidden below the page fold, often below other recommendations. More priority should be given to things such as product details over 'Other customers also bought' type messages.

Navigation is central to any website and research has shown that users search for content using trigger words. In Marks & Spencer's case, visitors may arrive at the site looking for specific links such as 'Jeans' or 'Womenswear'. The homepage advertising has recently used words such as this within the 'Perfect' range. This is potentially problematic as customers may use these links expecting to view the entire range from M&S, not realising Perfect is a particular product line. As a result, being given a far smaller selection of items than would be expected, customers may leave the site, believing M&S did not have the item they were looking for. It is a similar situation for the M&S sale which is cleverly disguised as 'Current Offers'.

SITE PERFORMANCE**David Flower, Vice President, EMEA, Gomez**

Gomez's services test and monitor the performance of websites from the outside-in. This provides a view of how a website is performing from the internet backbone (eg ISPs) as well as from actual desktop connections which show real-life online customer experience (or Last Mile).

Over the past 12 months, the performance of Marks & Spencer's home page has been variable to say the least. At the beginning of the period, the average home page download from the internet backbone was an acceptable 1.7 seconds. However, the performance dipped significantly in the months to follow, with an additional second added to the download time. The good news for Marks & Spencer's customers is that there has been a steady improvement in home page performance from September through to the New Year when it was almost back to its peak performance at the beginning of 2008.

Performance measured from the internet backbone is one thing, but how did Marks & Spencer's home page perform from the Last Mile where real revenue is being generated? Actually, the good news is that the site was available to UK web users 98.97% of the time during the critical Christmas and New Year period. The less than favourable news for Marks & Spencer is that its online customers had to wait on average a disappointing 7.2 seconds for the page to load. (This reflects total load time not necessarily perceived load time.)

While most ecommerce sites look like one entity they are in fact a mix of lots of other multiple entities brought together. The Marks & Spencer site is no exception. 3rd party hosting issues adversely impacted the speed of the home page performance during critical pre-Christmas and New Year high traffic times. These issues, while significant from an internet backbone perspective, were amplified at the Last Mile where the web-users sit, adversely impacting their experience of the site.

EYE TRACKING ANALYSIS**Guy Redwood, Managing Director SimpleUsability**

M&S seems to have some issues with a key roll-over menu that's hidden to some users and secondary navigation/filters that could be made more efficient. The site performed reasonably well and is commonly quoted by our research participants as a benchmark ecommerce site for ease of use.

Our user group was made up of 50:50 split of male to female with 40% having previously ordered online from Marks and Spencer. For this eye tracking analysis, users were asked to buy an outfit for a black tie event.

People who hadn't bought from M&S used the in-page links on the home page instead of the main menu. Eye tracking confirmed that they had all looked at the navigation early on, but unfamiliar users failed to realise that most areas of the shop were accessed through the drop down menu. One user needed help to find this menu. We would recommend making the 'Shop all Departments, Your M&S, My Account' items look more like navigation devices, since much of the site seems dependent on users realising this.

Once into the different clothing sections of the site, the left hand navigation was heavily relied upon and took much reading. We can see that, for this task, there is scope for making it more efficient. The categorisation in the male suits section failed to include an in-page link to eveningwear, which forced one user to exhaustively scan the page and still not find what he needed, even though eveningwear was listed in the left hand navigation. Section home pages should ideally give people multiple routes into content, either in-page links and through secondary navigation.

Overall, users showed a high level of confidence in the site, using photography as the main reference for making decisions, supported by the descriptive labels and then occasionally price. Users did notice the promotional flashes for offers and were sometimes distracted by the 'perfect' range labelling.


 The logo features the word 'YOUR' in a vertical, sans-serif font on the left. To its right, the letters 'M&S' are displayed in a large, bold, sans-serif font. The ampersand is a light green color, while the 'M' and 'S' are black.