

Why Site Search and Customer Experience Go Hand-in-Hand

Tim:

Well, hi, Steve. How are you?

Steve:

I'm great, Tim. I just got out of the dentist chair, and there's nothing like that cool, fresh feeling after some light torture. So, doing great.

Tim:

Well, if that's the goal, that's... I wish I could say the same. Oh, wait. No, I don't.

Steve:

No, no, no, no.

Tim:

All right. Well, great to see you again. Great to chat with you. So, we're going to take a slightly different tack today. We're going to jump into a completely different angle of customer experience and people's websites and the like, and that is our old pal site search. Right?

Steve:

Yes, indeed.

Tim:

You were telling me earlier you've been having a bunch of conversations with some of our clients around various elements of site search and things like that, and I thought it would be a good idea to take a step back and talk about why. Why do people do this and the like? So, let's just start there. Why is site search important in 2021? Why is this still a conversation we're having?

Steve:

Yeah. No, it's really interesting. I mean, you said the right things. Right? You said customer experience. Those are the magic words, because when you think about how folks who come to your website think about their interaction with your digital presence, they don't think about, "Oh, I got to do some searching. And then I got to do some navigating. And then I got to do some more searching." Right? They're just looking for the thing that ends their pain or the information that will take them further on the journey to finding the solution to ending their pain.

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Steve:

And it's funny. We often talk about personalization because that really is at the heart of all of this, what you're trying to do. Right? Create that experience that is engaging for the individual. And while most people think of personalization in the, "Oh, I know this is Tim, and Tim lives in this town and likes these things and therefore..." right? That's how they traditionally think of it. I mean, personalization is hard. That's just really a means to an end. Right? The end is, how do we create an engaging experience? And you have to do that no matter whether people are searching or navigating.

Steve:

I was talking to a prospect. They're not yet a client. I hope they will be soon. But I was talking to a prospect recently, and we were talking about personalization. I started to talk about this notion of site search and how that contributes. We actually got on a whole sidebar about site search and about how awful their site search is and about how they're just in the process of looking at that.

Steve:

And he said something. He goes, "The real tough part about this is because, site search really isn't that important to our digital customer experience." And I said, "Okay. Well, let's explore that a bit. Okay, 10% of your visitors visit sites, which is great." I said, "Do you know how many of those searchers convert?" And it's a B2B company, so it's convert in the sense of download the white paper, do that sort of thing.

Tim:

Right, give us an email address, whatever. Yeah.

Steve:

Exactly. Exactly. And he goes, "No, we never really looked at it." And of course they have Google Analytics. So, if you're using Google Analytics to run your campaigns, there's actually a report you could do. Right? You can just filter it by searchers. And we've found when you look at site search users, they're like, I think that number's 87% more likely to do a campaign conversion. So, these folks-

Tim:

And that's on that specific individual's website. Obviously, the numbers vary widely.

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Steve:

Oh, absolutely.

Tim:

What is it? Something like 40% more likely to 200% more likely. Is that right?

Steve:

Well, that's when you look at transactional businesses. Some of our clients have transactional businesses. You can order something on their website. And when you look at that, I mean, the data's is all over the place, but I think the low number is 43% more likely to buy. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

And some of the high numbers are 600% more likely to buy.

Tim:

Right. Right. Right. That makes sense.

Steve:

Yeah. When you think about, why is search important? It's because these are the folks generally who landed on your website, whether they came from Google or from a campaign or went direct. They thought they could find the thing just by clicking on some menus. Right? They couldn't.

Tim:

Shocking.

Steve:

So, instead of going away, they actually were committed enough to your business that they were going to search. So, it's really no surprise that the data supports that, that searchers are actually your best prospects. And if you can really optimize the experience for searchers, you're going to do more business.

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Tim:

Well, and you raise a great point there, Steve. I think when people see those numbers, when I've run into skepticism talking to people about it, I'm sure you have the same, is you talk about this 43 to 600% increase in transactional volume and conversion, however you want to look at it. And you get a lot of skepticism, because people are like, "Wait. You're telling me that search makes people convert this much better?" And it's like, no, no. No, no, no. It's people really, really, really want to convert. And you're making it so hard that the only option available to them is to search. Right?

Steve:

Yes.

Tim:

The cause and effect is completely reversed on that.

Steve:

Right. Yes. You don't want to drive more people to search. Right? You'd rather that they just find the thing.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

And by the way, that's what personalization is. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

If you do personalization right, that's the goal. Right? Don't make them search. Deliver this stuff to them because you know something about them.

Tim:

Well, yeah. I personally often refer to personalization just based on what we talk about as the search they didn't know to do. Right? This is what they would search for if they knew to search. But since they don't, we're just going to hand it to them.

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Steve:

Yes. And isn't that much nicer?

Tim:

Isn't that much nicer? Exactly. All right. So, let's talk about this a little bit more. I mean, if that's why search is so important, what's the problem that it solves for the searcher, for the customer, and also for the business. How does that make their lives better?

Steve:

Well, I mean, certainly for the searcher, if search is really effective at connecting that thing that they need to find in the moment, a piece of information that they need to find, they're going to move forward on their journey. And especially if they're later stage, consideration stage, they're ready to make that call to the sales rep or take the call from the sales rep. That is the obvious benefit for them. You're making it easier for them to progress along their journey.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Everybody, unfortunately, whether you're in B2B or B2C has to live up to the awesome retail experiences that exist.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

I get a lot of boxes from Amazon because Amazon makes it stupidly easy for me to get the stuff I want.

Tim:

Right. Well, I mean, you know this. I grew up in an eCommerce business. I grew up in a B2C eCommerce business, spent most of my time there. 100% of our conversions happen from people who searched. It was the nature of the business. To be fair, 80% of the people who didn't convert also searched. Right?

Steve:

Right. Sure.

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Tim:

But there's an expectation that people are always going to get the right answer. Whether they convert or not once they see what the right answer is, it's another matter. But, yeah. They got to get it, right? And they're trained everywhere they go that when I do a search... They're trained by Google. They're trained by Amazon. They're trained by the Apple app store that when I do a search, you're going to give me the answer I expect to receive.

Steve:

Yeah. And it's interesting when you look at... So, you mentioned retail or in the consumer side, 80, 90, 100% of your visitors search. Right?

Tim:

Right. Right.

Steve:

In B2B, it's usually high single digits, low teens.

Tim:

That's right. Yeah.

Steve:

But I think part of the reason is because B2B website visitors know that the search experiences are usually awful. Right? So, it's their last resort. Right? They'd rather go back to Google.

Tim:

Right. Right.

Steve:

And that is really the sin of bad search. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

So, now from a business perspective. Right? The sin of bad search is training people to go back to Google to try to find the thing on your website.

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Tim:

And why is that, Steve?

Steve:

Well, your competitors love it. That's why.

Tim:

Oh, that's a good reason. Yeah.

Steve:

Yeah. It's funny, whenever I do a search on a website of a prospect, I usually do some training of myself before I get into the meeting. And I often take those same terms, and I go out to Google just to see what I get. I'm trying to do some, I know, not AB testing, but just to understand the comparison.

Tim:

Sure

Steve:

And it's, I mean, the first four things you see on a search results page in Google are ads, and your competitors know to buy all your keywords. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Or they're just competing for the same keywords.

Tim:

Right. Yeah. Totally.

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Steve:

Yeah. So, for the business great site search, not only in the moment will connect a person with the things you're looking for; so good, you've got them; but you want to over time, and I think the industry, all industries, all verticals over time, want to train people to use the site search engines on their websites, make them awesome because that will then train humans not to go to Google for everything and not to give your competitors an opportunity to get that traffic from you, get that opportunity, get that business.

Tim:

Well, and our good buddy Mike has a snarky comment. I mean, who are we kidding? It's funny, but it's a little mean; that if you look at the site search on most B2B websites and an unfortunate level of B2C websites, they are nothing more than a random web page generator.

Steve:

Yes.

Tim:

I mean, when we look at search success across people we've worked with or sites that we've examined or industry data that's out there, before anybody uses anything we do... I'm not trying to turn this into a pitch for us, or at least I'm not yet. But when you look at people's search success, what's the number we typically see?

Steve:

When we first start working with clients, it's usually at best one in three.

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

If they're doing 30% there, they're good. The lowest I think we've ever seen is 9%. So, that's 9% of searchers finding what they want. And, again, best case about 30%.

Tim:

So, flipping that around... Flipping that around... We'll just do that again. So, flipping that around, what you're telling me is that 90% of them... I'm sorry. Let's take the average. 70% of the time, people are not finding what they're looking for.

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Steve:

Right.

Tim:

Yeah.

Steve:

It's stunning.

Tim:

10 people come to your website. If you're the business, 10 people come to your website and ask for help explicitly.

Steve:

Right.

Tim:

And you say to seven of them, "Nah, that's all right."

Steve:

Yeah. Oh, absolutely.

Tim:

All the best to you, my friend.

Steve:

And now you know they're going to Google. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

That is the kiss of death. And by the way, I mean, a lot of marketers are willing to accept that because they're just playing the law of large numbers.

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Tim:

Can you still afford to do that. I mean, in the age of rising Google search costs, in the age of rising ABM costs, in the age of getting it harder to get emails in front of people's faces because of blockers and the promotions tab in Gmail and God knows what all else. I mean, can you literally afford to keep playing that game and think you're going to win it?

Steve:

Well, no. And I think it's diminishing returns. Right?

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Marketers are seeing diminishing returns on all those things for all the reasons you just suggested. So, I do think it is a playbook from five years ago. And just like anything, people are slow to change, change their behaviors. But faced with all the challenges that are ahead of us as marketers, the death of cookies, et cetera, et cetera, all the privacy stuff, it really does behoove marketers for now looking at the margins. Right?

Steve:

Where can they squeeze more yield out of the dollars that they have? Because the competition for the eyeballs, for lack of a better word is, is fierce. Where we see things going, and especially in the ad space, you're going to have less opportunity to get in front of those eyeballs. So, yield becomes everything. We don't talk about yield enough on these marketing activities, but when everybody celebrates, "I got a 0.02% increase in my yield," and they get real excited, it's like, okay. But that's 0.02% in the old world. What do you need in the new world? You're going to need a much bigger number.

Tim:

No, it makes total sense. By the way I always like it, when you say the word behoove. I don't know why.

Steve:

There you go.

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Tim:

But, no. You're exactly right. I mean, in terms of how we improve yield and how we make this work better. So, let's talk in the abstract, I mean, without making this a commercial for SearchBox. But, again, we'll get there. How do people do this? What do they need to do to do it better?

Steve:

Yeah. So, the initial thing that most people think about is, "I need better technology."

Tim:

Right.

Steve:

Now, that may be true. You might be using... Say you're in a large enterprise and you're using a technology that wasn't designed for large enterprise. Could be true. You don't have the features to actually address the complexity of your environment, so that may be true.

Tim:

Or we've seen the scenarios, and I'm sorry for jumping in, but we've seen scenarios over the last couple years where you were using Google's search engine. And Google has gotten out of that business. Right? We've seen a lot of that over the last, what, two years or something?

Steve:

And there are some vendors, by the way, that are getting out of the search game realm for a variety of reasons. And part of that is there are some new, interesting technologies that have come out recently that have AI magic in them. But the reality is that when you look at the heart of any search engine, the technology itself, it's Lucene-based. It's either Solar or Elastic at its core. And fundamentally the technology is not the differentiator. What is the differentiator is the data.

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Steve:

So, when you think about, "Well, what should I do as an owner, IT owner of a search engine, a marketer who's the product manager of a search technology?" What should you be doing? You should be thinking about the data. And we have a certain point of view on, first and foremost, you should be understanding the customer experience. What is a successful search? And most vendors, most marketers, most IT managers, search performance begins and ends with two numbers. Right? The first number was, was the server up. Right? So, it's a real IT view of the world. And the second was, how many people are clicking on things?

Tim:

Right. Well, I mean, I would add to your list, most analytics packages.

Steve:

Yes. Oh, absolutely.

Tim:

With no disrespect to Adobe, with no disrespect to Google Analytics, they're great tools; and they do all kinds of things. Site search is a thing that they add onto it as opposed to think about.

Steve:

Yes. Oh, absolutely.

Tim:

Right?

Steve:

Yeah, no. None of these vendors, these analytics vendors, have a really thoughtful approach to how to assess the customer experience in search and the value of that customer experience. Although, what is interesting is if that number I cited earlier, which was the 87% of searchers are more likely to convert, you could probably tease that out of your analytics system if you tried. I mean, it's not that hard.

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Steve:

But trying to get at any number of that's related to, did the searcher find what they were looking for, is pretty much a non-starter. So, that's, for us, when we think about search, when we're building our product, it started with that. How do you assess the customer experience? So, that's the first thing. You think about that success data. How do you define success? How can you measure success of the search experience?

Steve:

The other thing I would think about is the point that we talk about when we talk about personalization, which is, how can we use data from that, insight data from that successful search experience outside of search, because we know that those folks who are searching aren't the majority of your website visitors. Most of them are navigating.

Steve:

But if you can figure out that if somebody's interested in a specific topic, which is essentially a keyword, and you know for sure, because you have the right data, that a page is the answer to that question; well, if you can discern that somebody is interested in a specific topic, you best show them that page, whether they're searching or not. Right? Figure out a way to get them to the page. That's the answer to the question.

Tim:

Okay. So, now comes the commercial for SearchBox, and GuideBox, Steve.

Steve:

No, you that. Both our products, both SearchBox and GuideBox, Search focused on the search experience. GuideBox focused on navigating experience. But that's the goal. Right? It's like, forget about the search technology. We work with any search technology, because we figured out long ago that Solar and Elastic out of the box, largely good enough for everything, because what differentiates great search is what we've just talked about. Data, really understanding the data about the customer experience.

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Steve:

And the other thing is the answers. You have to have great content, and no magical AI is going to make your content better. So, what we learned long ago was, let's work with whatever search engine somebody. Let's start where they are. Replacing a search engine is a pretty heavy lift. We're talking to one prospect now, and they're going through this nine-month process just to choose a new search engine. And then it's another six months to get the thing installed. It's like, do you really want to go through 12- to 18-months worth of work to replace your search engine, or would you rather start with where you're at and get better data and put that data to use?

Steve:

And that's where to answer the question you asked at the beginning of this segment, which was, what should people do first? Get better data. Get better data. First start with what's in your analytics package, even though it's flawed. Start there and tease out of your analytics package everything you can. And then if people want to learn more about what other data they can get, that's something that SoloSegment focuses on is, how do you harness the data that's trapped in your search engine and put that to use both within search and outside of search.

Tim:

That seems like a great place to wrap up, Steve. I would remind people that if they want to learn more about what we do and really about website engagement... I mean, that's fundamentally what we care about. Obviously, these products are just designed to drive that. They can go to solosegment.com/website-engagement. Again, that's solosegment.com/website-engagement, and get our new report all about how to improve website engagement with search, with personalization, and focused on creating a better customer experience. Steve, any last parting words of wisdom?

Steve:

No, I think we wrapped this up very nice. Thanks very much, Tim.

Tim:

It's always a pleasure. Talk to you soon.

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