

# Searching for Success

Furniture retailer modifies its website search function to increase sales

by JOHN MORELL

Shopping for a sofa? How about a divan, a chesterfield or just a plain old couch? Scott Perry never thought he'd be as wrapped up in the meaning of words as when he began improving the search function on the Jerome's Furniture website.

"It's very tricky and it can become confusing, which is what you don't want in your company's website," he says. "What one person calls a 'couch' is a 'sofa' to their neighbor and a 'divan' to the people down the street ... . And if they type 'davenport' you may not know what's going to show up in the search results."

The confusion made hunting for furniture on the Jerome's site puzzling at best as customers received a list of items based on what they typed, which was not necessarily what they were looking for.

"We had this great website, but our search capability with it was lacking," says Perry, the director of e-commerce and omnichannel for Jerome's, an 11-unit chain based in San Diego. "We knew there had to be a better solution."

Although furniture sales have traditionally been a bricks-and-mortar business, web use is catching up. In 2012, mobile access of Jerome's website was around 15 percent; today it makes up close to 65 percent.

## INFORMING PURCHASES

"It used to be that search was a kind of forgotten part of the retailer's website," says Tim Callan, chief marketing officer of SLI Systems. "As long as you had a little box in the corner with a magnifying glass graphic, you were good."



"About **75 percent** of our customers go to the website and **50 percent** use the information on our site to make their buying decision. We also have a good percentage of customers who come to the store, see what they like, then go home and order online." — Scott Perry, Jerome's

However, the text-based search engines added on to websites often failed customers. "I was looking on a golf products website for a new golf bag and typed 'bag' in the search box," Callan says. "The first results I got back were for bags of tees. That's the problem with older, text-based search engines — they're not intuitive and geared toward what a customer is looking for."

In his experience working with search functions and consumer behavior, Callan sees a striking link between the use of search and sales. "It's not uncommon for the average retailer to find that 15 percent of customers use the search function, and those that do make up 45 percent of sales. It's an area that needs to be optimized."

As a general rule, the consumer who

types in a search term on a retailer's website is not casually surfing. They have a purpose: finding a specific product. "This is what makes them so important," he says. "They're buying at a rate three times that of other visitors to your site."

While Jerome's was seeing e-commerce success, the issues surrounding the website's search capability dogged Perry. "We were using Sphinx, which is an open-source, full-text search system and it was good, but we wanted a program that would be great."

Perry attended a couple of e-commerce conferences in 2014 to talk to search vendors and retailers who used different systems, then met with the team from SLI. "They seemed to get what we were trying to do and saw that we provided a different type of

e-commerce experience, which complicated the search function.”

Jerome’s site receives plenty of traffic, though online sales are traditionally low, which the company expects. “It’s furniture, so customers are more inclined to want to see the product in person before they buy,” says Perry.

The website is a critical part of the sales process, however. “About 75

rhythms help the program refine and create more relevant results.

“Simply put, someone goes to the Jerome’s site, types ‘rattan chair’ and get results showing products,” says Callan. “They pick one and put it into a shopping cart. The system learns from that what is popular and moves that item higher in subsequent results.”

lan. “It gives you an extra element of control around the customer’s online experience.”

### ADDED BENEFITS

Jerome’s added SLI’s enhanced search capability to the website in March, and Perry held his breath. “I knew we’d see a higher conversion rate with a lift of maybe 20 percent if we were lucky,” he says.

After the first few weeks, Perry compared the sales conversion statistics with those from the same period in 2014, and the results were staggering: an increase of 50 percent. After chalking up the huge jump to an anomaly, Perry waited until the end of June and compared three weeks in that month to the same three weeks the previous year. This time he saw a conversion rate increase of 71 percent.

“What’s amazing about this is that in our industry, you scrape and grind for even a 5 percent increase in conversion rates,” says Perry. “And here just by adding a more intuitive search program we hit 71 percent.”

The program gave Perry and his staff information that could be shared with merchandising. For instance, “We found more searches for smaller scale, apartment-size furniture than expected, which could indicate more of a sales opportunity for those products than we expected,” he says.

Jerome’s encourages in-store use of the website with a 30-inch tablet computer that customers can access. They also anticipate having salespeople equipped with tablets so they can quickly access inventory while speaking to customers on the floor.

“It’s about combining the online and in-store experience so that they’re almost seamless,” says Perry. “If we can make it easier for our customers to find something, they’re more likely to buy it from us.” **STORES**

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percent of our customers go to the website and 50 percent use the information on our site to make their buying decision,” Perry says. “They’ll typically visit the website multiple times to look at what they want, then they’ll come to the store to make the purchase. We also have a good percentage of customers who come to the store, see what they like, then go home and order online.”

The system SLI proposed for Jerome’s is known as “learning-based search.” As the search is used, algo-

The result is a program that becomes intuitive the more it’s used. It can also be tinkered with to adjust for variations in search terms. Customers who ask for a “red chair” may not be shown results that include a particular manufacturer’s “vermillion chair.” The program can be taught that red and vermillion are synonymous.

It can also help with merchandising. “If I’m a shoe retailer having a Nike promotion, I can push those higher in my search results when someone’s searching for athletic shoes,” says Cal-