

# Considerations for optimising early stages of customer journeys on retail sites



An IMRG report, supported by Conversant



*A look at the various ways in which retailers can structure the early stages of customer journeys on retail sites – specifically focusing on attracting them to the site and the initial start points of their on-site journeys (homepage and search results page).*

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## Foreword – Getting off on the right foot



Attracting new visitors to your site can be an expensive business, but once you actually manage to get them there, how can you ensure your site is best structured for conversion?

IMRG have run numerous studies where we assess the effectiveness of various page structures, based on real underlying performance data. We are able to tell from that not just what *looks good*, but what *actually converts*.

This report shares some of this insight – it's not intended to be comprehensive, that would be an incredibly long report – to provide you with a checklist for things to consider when optimising your homepage and search results page.

*Andy Mulcahy, Strategy and Insight Director, IMRG*

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## Foreword – The expectation of personalisation



Every person is unique and everyone pays attention when their unique interests, desires and situations are catered for. It's human nature.

This principle remains true when brands speak and communicate with customers and prospects. 90% of consumers find personalisation appealing<sup>1</sup>, while 80% are more likely to do business with a company that offers personalised experiences. Consumers expect personalisation.

Yet while the barriers of entry for personalising your consumer journeys can seem daunting, in my experience it's usually simpler than many expect. For example, as well as it being best practice, huge efficiencies can be created by employing consistent messaging across an ecommerce environment and your push channels - email and display, for example.

There's further efficiency gains by taking this personalised consumer journey offsite, to wherever your existing and potential customers are. Customer journeys are incredibly complex, stopping and starting across channels and devices. By understanding who, where and how to target using a single customer view – an absolute requirement for true personalisation of communications – you can avoid pitfalls likely to damage both brand and bottom line. This includes product-led ads for items a consumer has already bought or weren't appropriate in the first place, and harassing consumers with the same ads over and over (incidentally, all of which are big issues with retargeting campaigns, but not personalisation).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://us.epsilon.com/power-of-me>

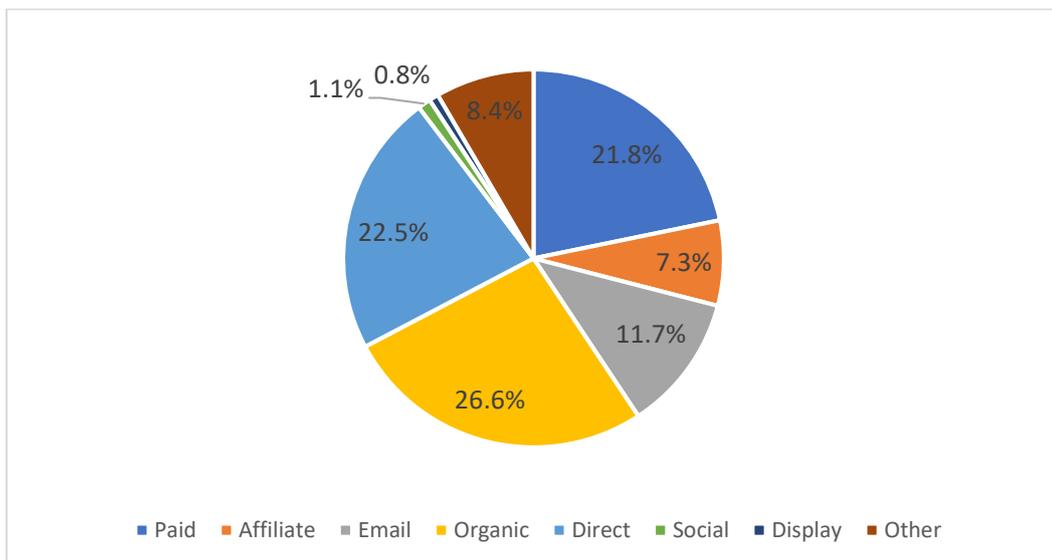
But above all, by expanding the consumer journey offsite, you're increasing your potential customer-base by as much as your data allows – in Conversant's case, our single customer view covers well over 200 million pseudonymised consumer profiles. It enables you to reach new customers, speaking to them on a one-to-one basis, at scale.

And it pays off. On average, we see conversion rates three times higher when consumers have received personalised display adverts.

*Elliott Clayton, SVP Media, Conversant*

## Where do customers come from?

There are multiple marketing channels through which customers may be referred to your site. The below chart shows the average split that retailers got, by revenue, in Q4 2018 from eight marketing channels: direct (eg: typed site URL into browser), organic (natural search results), paid (ads on Google etc), affiliate (voucher sites etc), email (link in an email), social (unpaid social media content), display (a display ad) and other (anything outside the other channels).



*Chart 1 – Share of revenue by marketing channel, Q4 2018*

There are, of course, also multiple reasons behind why someone may visit a retail site. The above data does not tell the full story; it is specific to a last-click attribution model and does not therefore cover a detailed customer journey.

In the next section, we will look at some things to consider when structuring journeys before the visitor reaches your site.

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## Attracting visitors to your site

*By Elliott Clayton, SVP Media, Conversant*

Attracting visitors to your site is simple, but attracting visitors who will convert is a lot more difficult.

The simple truth is that when visitors are more relevant, they're a great deal more likely to progress through the funnel to conversion. And with relevancy, we're not just talking about consumers having an interest in what you're selling, but them being at the right stage of the customer journey, and in the right location.

This is why getting your offsite marketing right is so important. By targeting consumers with an affinity to your brand and/or products, consumers drive themselves through your onsite funnel.

### ***What data do you use to target new and existing customers?***

Being able to reach the right consumer at the right time and in the right location depends on the data you have access to. Many offsite marketing channels depend on only one overriding data point – for example, that a consumer has previously visited a specific page on your site, or that they have previously bought a product from you. That's usually a group that's well-engaged with your business, but it also means that by targeting them, you're chasing the low-hanging fruit – the people who would have likely bought from you anyway.

Ask yourself who it is that your offsite marketing is targeting, and would they still buy from you if that offsite marketing didn't occur?

There are greater pitfalls by employing offsite marketing with a limited data-set – by sending irrelevant messages, you can annoy engaged consumers that may otherwise have led to a purchase, for example – but that's a little beyond the scope of this report.

The short answer is that it's very much possible to employ a single customer view in your offsite marketing – we have clients generating returns in excess of 10:1 right now by doing exactly that. If your offsite marketing activities are reliant on too little data, then consider other options.

### ***How do you measure your offsite marketing?***

Since the online marketing function has existed, we've been tied to gauging success via what a user clicked on, and what they do directly after that click. Yet consumer journeys are far, far more complex than that.

Before the purchase stage of the consumer buying journey, there are the awareness and consideration stages – both highly important stages for ecommerce marketers to influence. Yet measuring clicks rarely credits activity during these two stages – last click measurement actively discourages activity during them – instead favouring direct action when a consumer is ready to purchase. Unfortunately, that has meant that online marketing investment had shifted away from those stages.

By evolving the way you measure your activities, you can ensure that you spend budget in the right place – when consumers are looking to be influenced.

At Conversant, we measure activity via the incremental return it creates. It's based on huge insight, and the ability to create test and control groups to highlight the difference our personalised display ads have. But while that's the most accurate form, there are more rudimentary methods to get an idea of the incremental return your marketing has – using a geographic location as a control group, for example.

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## Progressing site visitors toward conversion

When your marketing is proving effective and visitors are reaching your site, the logical starting places for them are the homepage or a dedicated landing page (product pages can be common landing places too, but the focus of this report is on progressing visitors along to that stage of the customer funnel – the search results page is, therefore, included. Due to the highly specific and campaign-related nature of many dedicated landing pages, these have not been included as part of this report either).

This section sets out some questions for consideration when looking to optimise these pages / sections in support of high-quality customer journeys.

### Homepage

*Q: Should you have links directly to products?*

This refers to having featured products on the homepage, often in carousels, so a site visitor can click directly through to a product page from content on the homepage without having to go through, for example, category pages.

The attractiveness of doing so will be to some extent determined by the product categories offered, SKU count, how frequently new ranges / sales campaigns are launched etc. But there is evidence that there is a technical advantage in having links directly to products on the homepage.

In one study we did, we noted a correlation between retailers that had a link to a product page on their homepage and a relatively high product page start rate. Pages on sites that have strong links to the homepage rank well with Google, so it may be that having links directly to product pages on the homepage is an effective method for boosting SEO for that product page and getting site visitors further down the funnel quicker.

*Q: Should you include reviews?*

While reviews can be a powerful element in conversion, where and how exactly they are displayed can be an influencing factor. As might be expected, the most common place they tend to be shown is on the product page, but some include them on the homepage and search results page.

From our own studies, we have found that the impact on the search results page is less than on the product page. Furthermore, depending on your homepage layout Trustpilot note that a small integration of their review box above the fold on the homepage can have a high impact on lowering bounce rate and keeping browsers on the page. Larger integrations tend to perform better when below the fold, but above the footer (perhaps in

a carousel) showing review content meanwhile has a higher chance of increasing conversion rates.



*Q: Which kinds of site navigation should you encourage?*

This is a topic that warrants its own focused report, but for our purposes here a few things to consider when structuring the journey that a visitor may make across your site – focusing specifically on the navigation menu and the site search function.

- Some retailers find that the items they put at the top of their navigation menus become the most popular for visitors to click on; depending on your product type and range, you may find the order in which you put things on the page does something similar. Alternatively, keeping it simple may be the best approach – some have found that a simple alphabetical ordering actually improves conversion, as shoppers then understand clearly where to find something if they are already clear on the type of item they are looking for
- Should you have a sub-menu (ie one that sits just under the main navigation menu) and, if so, what should be displayed in it? As delivery has become more important as a differentiator, many retailers use that space to detail elements of the delivery offer. We've found a fairly inconclusive impact in terms of sub-menus pushing customers further down the funnel, but it's possible that some proceed to the latter stages (checkout) just to find out what delivery options / charges there are; thereby artificially inflating the early stage conversion. Another thing to think about is how to restrict the promotion of services – so if, for example, you offer next-day or click and collect, it can be frustrating for customers to see such messages if next-day isn't available to them or they live nowhere near a store
- Some retailers have managed to increase traffic to certain sections / pages by making it stand out visually in the navigation menu – highlighting an entry with a bright colour, for example
- How prominent is the site search function? Visitors who use site search tend to convert at a higher rate, so making it easier for them to do so may bring benefits (depending on whether you have the kind of catalogue where search is an attractive navigation option). Another thing to consider is whether site search remains visible when the customer scrolls down the site

*Q: Should you include non-sales content sections?*

While the overall purpose of a retail site is to sell product, not all content has to be so overt in intent. There are two other content types that some retailers see value in – editorial and social.

Editorial tends to take the form of a blog, giving lifestyle advice or making suggestions for outdoor adventure, cooking recipes, holiday ideas etc. What role could this content serve in the customer journey? Some retailers report that those site visitors that engage with editorial tend to have a relatively high conversion rate, though they are also regular visitors and likely already repeat customers. Could editorial content have a role to play in encouraging new or irregular visitors to convert, or is it unlikely to be much interest to anyone not already well engaged with the brand?

With social content on retail sites, customers are typically able to tag content on social networks (such as Instagram) so that it can be pulled in via a feed. This is most common with fashion retailers, as the obvious way for people to create relevant content is through images of them wearing items purchased from the brand. Of course, making this facility available does not mean customers will provide such content in high and regular volumes. Many will take the decision to include this facility precisely because their customers are already modelling their clothes on social networks – it's simply the provision of a window for marketing content that already exists. If your customers don't express a natural propensity to do so, the most pressing question would be whether it's realistic to expect them to now just because a feed exists on the site. How could they be encouraged to do so and how can it be sustained?

*Q: What other elements are worth testing?*

Things to consider A/B testing where we know retailers have noted an impact on conversion, whether positive or negative, include the colour of add to basket / buy buttons (also the position on the page, size and shape of it, whether it has rounded or sharp edges, wording etc), the size and type of font used in the navigation menu and even the use of capital letters (so 'Sale' instead of 'SALE').

## **Search Results Page**

If a visitor reaches your site at an early stage of the conversion journey – either on the homepage or via a landing page – and is interested enough to go further, the other important page before they reach a product page is the search results.

This section sets out some questions for consideration when looking to optimise this page.

*Q: What functionality should you include?*

It might be tempting to add as much functionality as possible on the listings to inspire visitors to visit the product page, but we've found mixed results in what impact these functions actually have at this stage.

Reviews are one example, as is rich functionality such as multiple image cycles – which enable visitors to view multiple views of the same product by hovering over the image.

This is not to say that these kind of tools are not useful anywhere, but that it seems to be less determining, on average, at this stage than on the product page where the more in-depth 'browsing' may be expected to happen.

*Q: How accurate should your results be?*

Returning a list of product matches of strong relevance to the search query executed by the customer would seem an obvious point, but we have actually found it can be counterproductive.

In our testing, several of the retailers in the sample who adhered too strictly to the criteria in the search query had a lower rate of visitors viewing a product page than those who allowed slightly less relevant products to appear as well.

It may be that, by being too strict, retailers can inadvertently bring browsing sessions to a premature end if the shopper is not presented with the exact item they searched for and see no alternative suggestions to continue browsing.

However, as ever looking at the full picture brings complexity – we have also seen evidence that visitors using site search tend to convert at a higher rate than those who don't, even where zero matches are returned in the search results listings.

*Q: Should you enable shoppers to skip the product page?*

The standard button CTA on listings on the search results page is 'view item' (or similar wording), but some retailers also offer a button enabling items to be added directly to the basket without having to visit the product page first.

The usefulness or otherwise of this functionality is related to product category and type. It can work for regular purchase items (toothpaste, food etc) where it isn't necessary to review attributes each time, as they do not tend to change meaningfully (or at all), but for items where any degree of browsing and research is still required, it's not likely to serve much purpose for visitors.



## Checklist

Here is a list of questions to ask when considering which areas of the homepage and search results pages to optimise.

| Homepage            |   |
|---------------------|---|
|                     | <i>Should you have links directly to products?</i>  |
|                     | <i>If so, which factors dictate what products get shown?</i>  |
|                     | <i>Do you need to have category pages? How should they be structured?</i>   |
|                     | <i>Should you include reviews? Above or below the fold? What prominence is given to them?</i>                                     |
|                     | <i>Which kinds of site navigation should you encourage?</i>   |
|                     | <i>How should you order the content in your navigation menu?</i>  |
|                     | <i>Should you have a sub-menu and, if so, what should be displayed in it?</i>   |
|                     | <i>Are there any regions where you might need to avoid showing certain information (such as next-day if not available there)?</i> |
|                     | <i>Do you want to highlight certain sections / pages in the navigation menu?</i>  |
|                     | <i>How prominently should your site search function be displayed?</i>   |
|                     | <i>Should you include editorial content?</i>  |
|                     | <i>Should you include a social media feed?</i>  |
|                     | <i>What size and type of font will you use?</i>   |
|                     | <i>Is there any benefit to using uppercase instead of sentence case?</i>  |
| Search results page |   |
|                     | <i>What functionality should you include?</i>   |
|                     | <i>How accurate should your search results be?</i>  |
|                     | <i>Should you enable shoppers to skip the product page (add straight to basket)?</i>  |
|                     | <i>What colour should the button be? Also size and shape of it, should it have rounded or sharp edges etc?</i>                    |

## About IMRG



For over 20 years, IMRG (Interactive Media in Retail Group) has been the voice of e-retail in the UK. We are a membership community comprising businesses of all sizes – multichannel and pureplay, SME and multinational, and solution providers to industry.

We support our members through a range of activities – including market tracking and insight, benchmarking and best practice sharing. Our indexes provide in-depth intelligence on online sales, mobile sales, delivery trends and over 60 additional KPIs. Our goal is to ensure our members have the information and resources they need to succeed in rapidly-evolving markets – both domestically and internationally.

[www.imrg.org](http://www.imrg.org)

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## About Conversant



Conversant is a leader in personalised digital marketing, helping the world's biggest companies grow by creating personalised experiences that deliver higher returns for brands and greater satisfaction for people. Offering a fully integrated personalisation platform, personalised media programmes and one of the world's largest affiliate marketing networks - all fuelled by a deep understanding of what motivates people to engage, connect and buy.

For more information, please visit [www.conversantmedia.eu](http://www.conversantmedia.eu)