

Search And Social Together Aid Online Shoppers

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Online buyers rely on a healthy mix of search and social media throughout the purchasing process

Purchasing funnel. Buying cycle. Path to purchase. Over the years, the desire for marketers to label and map the exact nature of the online buying process has uncovered the complexities of the journey and the growing number of resources buyers rely on as they move to make informed purchasing decisions.

Research from GroupM Search and comScore highlights the increased use of yet another resource consumers are turning to in combination with their tried-and-true search engine usage: social media.

Marketers still skeptical of the overall influence of social media on online purchasing habits have reason to rethink that skepticism.

In fact, buyers who purchase or convert online are almost as likely to use a combination of search and social resources (48%) as they are to use just search (51%) along the path to purchase.

Furthermore, when consumers were exposed to both brand-specific search results and social media, search clickthrough rates increased by 94%, indicating the investment in social media can help marketers to better influence consumers during their purchasing process and boost search performance.

However, marketers looking to capitalize on social media's role in vetting shortlists and identifying new brands will have to look beyond standard media channels and brand-controlled experiences on Facebook and Twitter.

Buyers researching brands on their product shortlist depend largely on their peers' opinions—30% of consumers rely on user reviews to aid in their purchase decision, whereas only 17% and 9% turn to Facebook or Twitter, respectively.

In the 90 days leading up to purchase, less than 1% of all online purchasers engaged with brand-controlled social media from Facebook, Twitter and YouTube or ads on social sites, whereas 16% of consumers engaged with vertical- or industry-specific blogs offering expert opinions and product reviews.

Reliance on review-focused social media channels makes it difficult for marketers to control consumer exposure to unapproved brand messages and interactions as consumers vet each brand on their shortlist.

Additional findings from ForeSee Results further emphasize the role of product review websites as an important influence on buyers visiting retail websites. Compared to other influences, product review websites were most likely to affect the shopper's likelihood of purchasing online, sharing this distinction with another highly influential factor: word-of-mouth recommendations.

Somewhat contradictory to the GroupM and comScore findings is the reported level of consumer satisfaction of interaction with branded messages and advertising on social networks, indicating an area ripe for further investigation to better understand the true influence of brand-created messaging on social networks.

In reality, the data further illustrates the complexity of the online path to purchase and further justifies the need for marketers to track their individual marketing programs, specifically their search marketing and social media efforts, to uncover the channels and resources that best optimize the consumer buying experience.

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