

Half the products on your website are invisible to customers - here's how to get them seen

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Foreword



Search has changed dramatically in the last two decades. We frequently see executives thinking they have organic search “covered” because there is a long-standing function in the business.

The reality is, however, that organic search is now facing technical challenges that didn't exist 10 years ago and the stakes are even higher for businesses that get search wrong.

With 50% of web pages not visible in organic search, the time is now for executives to elevate and prioritise organic search. Ask yourself:

- **Am I investing enough in organic search? How do I know?**
- **Do I understand our current strategy?**
- **Do I know how much revenue organic search generates?**
- **What KPIs should our SEO program focus on?**

As the importance of organic search grows, measurable return on its investment is no longer a “nice to have.” Coupled with its technical complexities, it's critical for marketing and commerce leaders to re-evaluate - and demand more from - organic search.

Founded on its full-funnel search methodology, Botify is the only solution to analyse and transform all SEO actionable data into AI-powered insights, and automatically highlight search optimisation opportunities focussed on driving organic performance and business growth.

We hope learning how Walmart, L'Oréal, and Under Armour have transformed organic search into their leading performance marketing channel inspires you to follow in their footsteps.

Benoit Gourdon
President, EMEA

Introduction

The pandemic has driven a step-change in online shopping. In the UK, ecommerce accounted for 27.9% of total UK retail sales last year from 19.2% the previous year, according to the Office of National Statistics, an increase of 45% year on year!

This acceleration was seen across the globe. Worldwide ecommerce spending rose \$900bn in 2020, accounting for \$1 in every \$5 spent on retail, compared to \$1 in every \$7 in 2019, according to Mastercard's Recovery Insights report.

Brands have followed their customers and are investing more online than ever before, both in enhancing their websites and in driving more traffic to those websites, which has led to a surge of spending in search.

Botify strategic partner, Salesforce, too, sees this growing trend and emphasises the need to invest in your own digital storefront. With this surge, brands must ensure they remain relevant on the channels where their consumers are most active. According to Alex Drinker, Global Head Retail Industry Advisors, "the top channel is still your website, and you always have to remember to optimise your website so your pages can be discovered by engines and consumers throughout the journey."

According to eMarketer, search ad spending in 2020 was estimated to have grown 5.9% despite big reductions in investment in sectors such as travel. The big driver of this growth is retail as it shifts to serve digital customers.

However, the more popular and effective paid search becomes, the more costly it gets.

INTRODUCTION

Meanwhile, organic search is often an untapped channel that can be siloed in retail businesses due to its perceived technical nature. As a result, it is not always recognised as the performance marketing channel it should be by senior marketing and business leaders.

Brands must not ignore organic search as a cost-effective route to attract the fast-growing audience of online shoppers, who are searching for a more eclectic range of products.

Walmart has established technical SEO as a strategic function of the business. At Botify's Crawl2Convert conference, head of SEO Timothy Resnick said that to truly make the most of the marketing potential it holds, retailers must make it a strategic priority.

"SEO happens to be one of those things that is sometimes hard to see and kind of lives between the cracks. And, it is occasionally taken for granted as well, because it's free."

"For a large brand, it's critical to bring your teams together. So many people have their hands in SEO that might not even know it – and they may be taking direction in a very siloed approach. Continue going up the ladder to implement mandates, and make sure SEO is ingrained in the culture."

Senior manager, global SEO

Reinforcing the sentiment, Dana Tan, senior manager for global SEO at Under Armour said during a Botify webinar last year, "most SEOs have small teams, even at large companies," which means "that three of the most important things are advocacy, education, and evangelism...because 80% of the SEO that happens at your organization isn't happening on the SEO team."

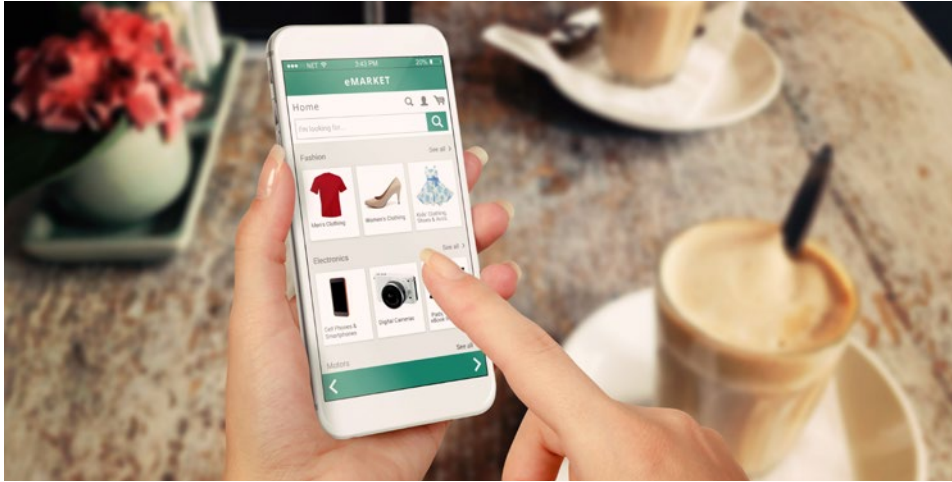
However, there are big challenges to overcome when it comes to organic search. Simply put, there is too much content on the internet for Google to search it all and deliver results to users in milliseconds. In fact, experts believe that around half the product pages on large retail websites are not even seen by search engines, and therefore never seen by consumers in search results.

Retail Gazette, in partnership with SEO industry leaders Botify, delves into how to make sure retailers get their most important web pages seen by customers and what steps businesses should take to get search right.

Read on to discover how global brands have used organic search as a key performance marketing channel and learn how to:

- **Improve page visibility and drive more traffic and conversions on your website**
- **Enhance your user experience online**
- **Maximise your content investment**
- **Get your ecommerce strategy right**

The visibility problem



The website is the most important shop window that retailers and brands have.

Over time, retailers have invested in beautiful web design, compelling content, and snazzy features such as image search or fit technology, all in an effort to make their products stand out online. However, many shoppers will never see any of this because Google - the virtual high street where this shop window is found - doesn't know half of your website exists meaning all that product goes unloved.

With search accounting for around 35% of all website traffic, this could be costing brands much-needed sales.

The simple reality is there is too much content online for search engines to process - something Google has long admitted to.

As far back as 2009, it advised: "Google has a finite number of resources, so when faced with the nearly-infinite quantity of content that's available online, Googlebot is only able to find and crawl a percentage of that content."

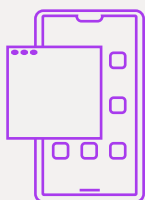
To deliver a search result in milliseconds, Google has to prioritise what it crawls and some very common industry practices can place web pages on the 'do not search' list.

SECTION 1 - THE VISIBILITY PROBLEM

Botify describes organic search as a funnel with five different stages.

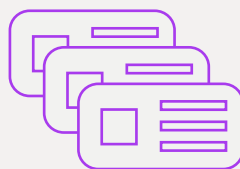


- 1 Crawl** - The first step for any website to generate impressions and traffic from organic search is to be crawled by search engines.



- 2 Render** - Once a page is crawled it then has to be rendered, which means that content has to load properly and be turned into text and raw assets that search engines can read.

In order to give a richer customer experience online, developers have increasingly invested in interactive and dynamic content that uses JavaScript, which creates unique challenges for bots to render.



- 3 Index** - Once a page is fully crawled and rendered, search engines will assess if it should be indexed.



- 4 Rank** - Search engines will also use a number of different ranking signals to understand and assess the quality and the content on each page. This will allow them to rank the most relevant pages to users' search queries.



- 5 Convert** - The final stage is conversion, when the user visits the page and then goes on to purchase.

Search is sequential, which means if a piece of content fails one step in the funnel, the subsequent steps will not be taken. So if a piece of content cannot be successfully crawled, a brand cannot improve its rankings for that page.

Botify director of product marketing, Nate Sullivan, says that many brands focus their efforts on the tail end of the funnel - improving ranking and conversion - however, ignoring the earlier stages can make all of this redundant.

Five common SEO struggles

There are many factors that can impact visibility, but we highlighted some common challenges that many brands face.

1 Page loading times

Retail websites have become increasingly content-rich and interactive over time. Many of the dynamic elements used to do so, such as live chat or sizing tools, are deployed through JavaScript.

Although these features create a much more engaging customer experience, they can also increase the time it takes for elements on the page - or the entire page - to load. This also means it's likely these pages require more resources from Google to execute the code and render. Google may not index the page, or if they do, slow load times can impact rankings in search results.

2 Duplicate content and templates

Google's goal is to show the most relevant content for a given query, therefore, it devalues content that is too similar to other pages.

For example, location-specific pages, which only serve products available in a certain geographic region, will also look very similar, which could impact whether Google crawls them.

3 Choosing irrelevant keywords

Many brands rely on guessing what the important keywords are for shoppers and then focus on how they compare on those search terms against competitors.

While it may seem sensible for a sportswear brand to focus on how they rank on the term 'basketball shoe,' Sullivan believes a far smarter tactic is to explore which terms visitors to the site are using to get there and whether such users convert.

The brand may find the terms 'LeBron James reverse dunk' are keywords that a substantial portion of visitors are using to find a product page.

“Brands shouldn’t guess which terms matter, they should look at what terms people are actually using. After all, around 15% of search queries are brand new. This is a giant bank of customer intent data that is often overlooked,” says Sullivan.

4 Not being mobile-first

Since 2019, Google has prioritised mobile-first content, which means it now crawls, indexes, and ranks web pages based on the mobile version of the site rather than the desktop. This is because the majority of users now search on mobile devices - last year 61% of web visits in the US were made on mobile, according to Google Analytics.

Brands must not only make sure content is available on mobile, but that the mobile version is fast and user-friendly.

5 Not signposting most important pages

For brands, product pages are often the most important pages on their website when it comes to driving conversions, however, such pages are often buried beneath the greatest number of clicks from the homepage.

This takes Google longer to discover and index, therefore they are often overlooked, while updates to them, such as new products being added, can go unnoticed for a long time.

Retailers can help direct Google to such high-performing pages through internal linking, and by adding crawl instructions that tell the search engine to ignore certain pages in order to prioritise others.

These are just five of many hurdles that can prevent the most important web pages from being viewed, which can and do have a dramatic impact on retailers’ bottom line.

Fixing the problem: how retailers have opened up their website to all

A major marketplace - making invisible content visible

In an extreme example of how some website pages go unseen and unindexed by Google, Botify worked with one marketplace where an astounding 99% of their 10 million URLs were invisible to those searching.

The US website, which helps users find the product that fits their search criteria, was structured on huge amounts of data, however, all of this data was just too much for Google to crawl.

The first step Botify took was to identify how the site was structured and work out how Google and other search engines interacted with it, which is when it uncovered the dramatic amount of invisible pages.

The overwhelming majority of these pages were orphans, URLs without any links to them, which is how search engines like Google find new pages, and almost 80% were unable to be crawled as they were tagged incorrectly.

To rectify this, Botify first updated the site's robots.txt file, which informs crawlers which pages should be excluded from their search. It then set about eliminating the infinite refinements which were creating a multitude of new pages, such as adding features.

This work helped to cut the number of URLs in half, enabling Google to focus on more valuable content. This increased the number of pages Google crawled from 2% of the website to 10.5% in just 6 weeks.

Botify's second analysis of the website showed where pages were too deep to be easily accessed by search engines, which the firm rectified by building links between the homepage and key pages such as make and model categories. This helped to increase the perceived importance of these pages in Google's eyes and consequently improved crawl from 10.5% to 22%.

In just a few weeks, Google crawl had increased by 19 times and helped to double weekly organic traffic.

The marketplace is now focusing on optimising its sitemap and removing expired pages, which result in high customer abandonment - a significant negative ranking factor, to grow organic traffic further.

L'Oréal France - making the most of content to drive conversions

Like many brands during the pandemic, L'Oréal was forced to cut some of its media spend and, as chief marketing and digital officer for its French business Elise Ducret says, it had become clear that "SEO has regained its first place as a performance channel for us and become more important than ever."

L'Oréal's focus was to use organic search to boost visibility and traffic to its content, which in turn would drive conversions online.

"The key benefit with organic search is the credibility it provides to our consumers," she explains. "They are assured of the quality of the content and hence there is a higher degree of brand integrity."

"Paid is more straightforward and direct in the sense that we buy keywords, and we appear in searches as a result. With SEO, in comparison, we develop a content strategy, become subject matter leaders, and ensure we are capturing the interest of our consumers in a more authentic way."

SECTION 2 - FIXING THE PROBLEM

L'Oréal took inspiration from an unusual source to ensure its SEO was firing on all cylinders - Marie Kondo.

"In the same way that Marie Kondo is an expert in tidying up closets at home to optimise space, if we organise all the elements well, in such a way that they are visible, they will be used by consumers. And so we implemented this Marie Kondo strategy last year to properly reference and index all of our content to ensure that it is seen and used and relevant to the consumer."

With 56 brands, 14 ecommerce sites, and a huge number of product launches, L'Oréal France creates substantial amounts of content, which can lose visibility because it's constantly being replaced by newer content, which Google prioritises in terms of crawling.

L'Oréal worked with Botify to help make sure its extensive catalogue of content was visible and ranked highly for those searching online.

Ducret says: "When you have shared content for ten years on how you use a skincare product or a routine for example; that content is just as relevant today as it was 10 years ago."

To make things easier for L'Oréal, Botify provided automated recommendations for the group on what actions to take, prioritised based on potential business impact. Ducret says in a complex organisation, which spans many brands and regions, this made things easier to implement.

Capitalising on this huge bank of content and making it more visible organically helped L'Oréal achieve its goal of ecommerce reaching 20% of total group sales during 2020. Online revenue grew 62% over the year which enabled it to smash its 20% target with ecommerce reaching the record level of 26.6% of all sales.

How websites can combine JavaScript's enhanced UX with SEO excellence

JavaScript is now commonly used by retailers as it can create a compelling user experience and provide much interactivity for shoppers. However, it can also wreak havoc on search performance.

Luxottica global head of search Federico Rebeschini, during Botify's Crawl2Convert event late last year, noted that the work the organisation did to integrate more interactivity and functionality into its website through JavaScript created search problems for the sunglasses giant. However, he says SEO teams need to find solutions to such problems as JavaScript is now a crucial part of web design.

"JavaScript is here to stay. You really need a work around for Google. Anything you can do to make it easily understandable and less costly for rendering will be rewarded by search engines across the board," he said.

Luxottica opted to pre-render content to make sure that Google was able to read it.

American Eagle senior SEO manager James Patterson opted to keep navigation, links, and critical content in raw HTML when it launched its JavaScript website.

"We'd rather see Google swim through water than swim through mud. The more you put behind the JavaScript curtain, [the more] you're making Google swim through mud," he said at Crawl2Convert.

It is important for brands to discover whether their JavaScript is having an impact on search by comparing the rendered and unrendered version. Botify's JavaScript crawler allows you to crawl and analyse your site's JavaScript with unprecedented speed, conducting a one-million-page analysis in just three hours compared to the few weeks needed by desktop-based crawlers.

This allows brands to identify issues quickly so they can make the necessary optimisations that will improve content accessibility, traffic, and rankings.

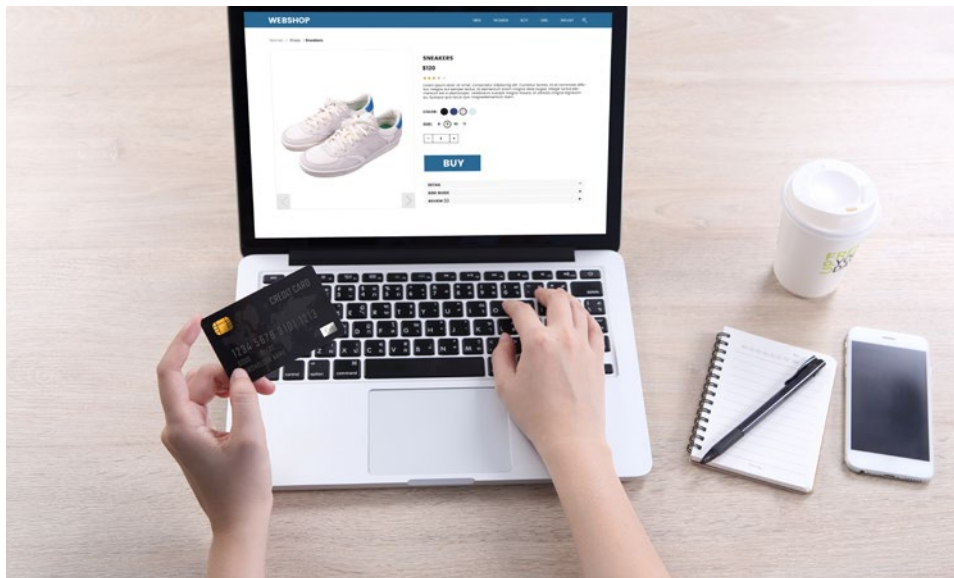
Botify worked with Carvana, a car retailer that relies on high-tech ecommerce over high-touch car showrooms to drive sales. This means that its website needs to attract both customers and search engines as organic search is one of its most important acquisition channels.

It uses JavaScript to power its beautiful user experience, but after auditing its site using Botify's rendering tools found that search engines were not rendering server-side code, and therefore missing big chunks of its website.

Carvana was able to implement a series of code fixes and adapt some high profile content so it was discoverable when Google searches for HTML.

The changes resulted in an astounding 749% jump in the number of URLs - from 3,500 to 29,700 - that were ranked by Google within just two months.

Getting search right – five steps your business should take



Search can have a big impact on your business's bottom line. Although many search solutions are technical in nature, getting it right involves strategic changes across retail organisations.

Here are five key steps to take to make sure your company is getting the most out of search.

1 Get senior stakeholder buy-in

As Forrester's 'Realize Greater Revenue By Prioritizing SEO' white paper concludes: "It's not enough to just do SEO; businesses must continually optimise their SEO capabilities to truly turn it into an engine for business growth, or else they'll lose out."

This kind of commitment needs buy-in from senior stakeholders within businesses. This can ensure investment, and can help break down internal silos, which is important as search touches many diverse parts of retail organisations from marketing to engineering.

Making a business case for your search strategy is crucial. Ultimately, search is how a vast proportion of new customers are acquired, making SEO a low cost way to boost revenue.

Under Armour senior manager for global SEO Dana Tan says it is important to speak in terms that senior executives understand: “You need to be able to talk their language and understand what matters to them, what their goals are and speak to that.”

“Paid search always gets a lot more [investment] but their ROI can’t touch what SEO can do.”

The subject matter may be technical but the underlying principles are simple - and it makes businesses money. The Forrester report found that 91% of organisations with the most mature SEO practices find it very profitable with the top benefit cited as increased sales.

This is a compelling case to make to retail’s business leaders.

2**Measure success**

SEO should be measured by the same ROI metrics as other investments. This can help drive stakeholder buy-in, investment, and provide an important KPI on which to evaluate search performance.

Many marketers have had their ad spend cut over the past 12 months, which makes it more critical than ever to optimise spend and the impact of investments. SEO may be viewed as free traffic but there are associated costs of optimisation work, such as technical or consulting support.

Botify recommends using organic conversions as the primary metric to measure although it acknowledges that there are some challenges when companies use last-touch attribution models.

3 Focus on the basics

Many retailers are looking to invest in sophisticated tools to improve their website performance when their efforts could be better served getting the basics right.

***If shoppers can't find your products online,
why spend big on new technology to achieve
nominal gains in conversion?***

A full audit of your website to discover if it's being crawled and indexed correctly could reveal far bigger wins to go for.

4 Think search first

Retailers can retrospectively fix SEO problems - as demonstrated in this white paper, however approaching your digital commerce strategy with a search-first mindset can maximise what can be achieved.

Search strategists are used to navigating and optimising less-than-ideal designs or unique platform configurations, which are at times unavoidable, but if you are embarking on a large project such as a site migration, involve your SEO team early.

Site migrations are commonplace among retailers and often hefty projects with multiple stakeholders and dependencies. Leaning on the expertise of your SEO team to both understand the nuances and SEO "gotchas" of your ecommerce or CMS platform, and build a plan to safeguard your hard-earned and important traffic can be the difference between a successful site launch and a disaster.

When global sportswear brand Under Armour began migrating all of their global domains to Salesforce Commerce Cloud, Dana Tan, senior global SEO lead, was integral to the strategy and plan.

Tan relied heavily on the partnership between Botify and Salesforce Commerce Cloud, which is premised on integrating web server log files, to precisely understand search bot activity on the website throughout the entire process.

***"Getting server logs...takes the conjecture
out of SEO and it's 100% scientific. It's data."***

You can't argue with cold, hard data. And that really makes SEO a science instead of guesswork."

This was especially helpful when there was an unexpected spike in server requests from Google. Instead of speculating the cause, which could have harmed SEO performance, Under Armour was able to properly diagnose and resolve the issue, protecting critical traffic.

Organic search is a long-term strategy and one that can influence the performance of so many other digital channels. Taking a more holistic view on search, and thinking about SEO early and often, can maximise return on investment across all channels.

5 Adopt the right tools to help

The world of SEO may appear complex and technical, but there are tools available to help your company cut through this.

This is where Botify can help. It cross-indexes your site content, server logs, keyword data, and business metrics to surface performance issues and discover potential opportunities to improve not just traditional metrics like rankings, but every part of the organic search funnel.

By combining this with other data such as traffic and keywords, as Botify's platform does, retailers can identify problems and implement solutions rapidly.

Marketing teams must arm themselves with the tools that allow them to see what's happening under the hood of a retail website in real time.

Otherwise, they risk rendering half their website invisible to online shoppers which will hinder sales from the biggest, most important shop in their portfolio.

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