



## Searched But Didn't Find

Don't you just love blinding insights into the bleeding obvious? My latest one arrived in the middle of a series of face-to-face interviews with online customers for a client. The customers described how the catalogue dropped through the letter-box, how they took time to flick through it marking what they liked and then how they jumped online and entered what they wanted into the search box and then added it to the basket. Of course! Multi-channel shoppers must use on-site search a lot! And they also must use search in quite distinctive ways. Which leads to the equally obvious but much more challenging question – how well does the onsite search on catalogue companies' websites work?

In this article I will look at two aspects of on-site search – firstly, what is presented to the customer for them to enter their search key-phrase and secondly, how the search results are presented back to them.

I guess the first rule has really got to be don't hide the search box!

Here is a screenshot of the Brightminds site, blurred to show how customers see it at first glance. The search box isn't obvious – in fact it is easily overlooked because it is surrounded by brighter,



more striking visual elements.

A variation on this rule is don't confuse customers with your search box. Both Healthy Direct and The White Company fall foul of this. Research<sup>i</sup> reveals that customers have an expectation that search will be in the upper right hand corner of the page. Healthy Direct have a visually prominent search box in the upper right hand part of their page – the only problem is it isn't for on-site search. It is for searching offer codes and I bet they get a lot of failed searches from it. The White Company is simply trying to be too clever. Their search box appears to offer two different ways of searching – Search and A to Z Search. What could an A to Z Search be? A search with the results listed alphabetically? A search of the A to Z index of products to see if this category or product type is sold by the White Company? No, it turns out that the A to Z Search is nothing to do with what is been entered in the search box – it is simply a link to the A to Z Index page; unlike the identically styled Search next to it, which is actually a search button disguised as a link!



Making the search box work well is not difficult.

1. Have a nice big text-box. How big? Statistics from OneStat<sup>ii</sup> show that over 50% the key phrases entered into search engines are 3 words or more. This suggests that search boxes should be wide enough for at least 30 characters, a test that only 2 of the 15 catalogue sites researched for this article<sup>iii</sup> passed ([www.ctshirts.co.uk](http://www.ctshirts.co.uk) and [www.flyingflowers.com](http://www.flyingflowers.com))
2. Right next to the text-box, have a brightly coloured button with 'search' on it. This doubles as a label for the search-box and a call to action on what to do once you have typed in a key phrase.
3. One small but important detail – if you have prompt-text in the search box (e.g. 'enter keyword or product code') make sure that you error-trap searches submitted with that text still in the box and give client-side feedback (e.g. 'please enter a search term in the search box') rather than taking them to a search results page with no results. Of all the searches on one of our client sites, 25% were for the prompt-text 'search product range'. Testing catalogue sites for this article, 10 had prompt text in the search box but only 3 effectively error-trapped it (see [www.flyingflowers.com](http://www.flyingflowers.com) for the best solution).
4. Finally, I was surprised to see none of the 15 catalogue sites had any auto-complete functionality. This sends the first few characters of the customer's search string back to the web server, using AJAX and prompts them with the most likely matches, as seen below in Yahoo.co.uk. This functionality can help customers enormously, if they know what they are looking for but don't know what you might have called it.



Okay, your customer has found the search box, has entered a keyword phrase and hit the search button. Now the fun begins!

To find out how search should **not** work, go to [www.gardeningdirect.com](http://www.gardeningdirect.com). Let's assume I am an existing customer with a copy of the Gardening Direct catalogue – I just want to use the web site to place my order. If I'm really lucky I will have chosen something with a highly unusual name that Gardening Direct don't have a huge range of, like their Verbena Polka – in which case I only get the 5 different Verbena's they stock in my search results, with my polka variety 3<sup>rd</sup> in the list. If, on the other hand I want a Trailing Petunia Mix I get 84 search results including Gladioli, Lettuce, Lupins and a box of rain gel crystals, with my trailing petunias tucked in at search result number 79. The cause of this catastrophe is that they are giving me everything that is either trailing, OR comes as a mixed

selection OR is a putunia - whereas what I actually want is the one item that is trailing AND comes as a mixed selection AND is a putunia. Solving this particular problem may be as simple as changing a single setting on their on-site search engine.

Ignoring Gardening Direct, which is exceptionally poor compared to the other sites I analyzed, let's continue to imagine our catalogue shopper: they have the catalogue in front of them, they've already found what they want to buy and they know exactly what the product is called – they are just using on-site search to find it. Ideally, our imaginary customer wants on-site search to take them straight to the product page so they can buy it. Sadly this only happens in one of our 15 catalogue sites ([www.ctshirts.co.uk](http://www.ctshirts.co.uk)). On most of the other sites, the customer is taken to a search results page with only 1 product on it. The search is working well but the link between search results and the logic controlling the site is not. Why should the poor old customer have to click the one product link on the page – why doesn't the site recognize a perfect match and take the customer to the product automatically. Admittedly this is a minor complaint but lots of minor irritations make for a poor customer experience. A more major complaint is when sites find the right product but add another few hundred products just in case you changed your mind about what you wanted since hitting the search button (The White Company offers 172 products, including a toilet brush, slippers and a cereal bowl in response to a search for 'white wooden hanger', which it presents as search result #1).

Another failing in the majority of sites is not realizing that there is an entire product category that matches what the customer is looking for. Search [www.smythson.co.uk](http://www.smythson.co.uk) for 'handbags & purses' and you get 4 results, yet they have a category of Handbags and Purses with 46 products in it. Search [www.gltc.co.uk](http://www.gltc.co.uk) (Great Little Trading Company) for 'rainwear' and you get 2 products but navigate to clothing > rainwear and you get 13 products. Search for 'food storage' on [www.cotswoldco.com](http://www.cotswoldco.com) and you get 2 products yet there are 19 products in Food Storage category within the Kitchen Department.

Finally, when you do present an extensive list of search results to the customer, make sure they have what they need on the search results page to make an informed choice. Search for 'cardigans' on [www.brora.co.uk](http://www.brora.co.uk) and you get 35 search results. Search results #6 is a 'Retro Knitted Jacket' that is allegedly available in 4 colours. Click through to the product page and you find it is actually only available in one colour and this is only available if you are a size 10. This makes finding something you like that is available in your size almost impossible.

On-site search can be an amazingly effective online sales tool. Research suggests that customers who use search are three to five times as likely to buy than those that use link navigation. It is, however, not going to give anything like this performance if it irritates or frustrates your customers. Catalogue shoppers have specific needs of on-site search (typing in the exact product title into the search box) and these needs are a lot more straightforward to accommodate than the majority of customers who don't know what the product is called, wouldn't know how to spell it if they did and are not really all that sure that you stock this sort of thing on your site in the first place! Give them a break; let them find what they search for!



Available in 7 colours

Sale> [Women> V Neck Cardigans>](#)  
**Retro Knitted Jacket**

£159  
Available in 4 colours

Sale> [Women> V Neck Cardigans>](#)

[More Information](#)

Search results say available in 4 colours but the product page, below, reveals only one size is available in colour.

**Retro Knitted Jacket** Code: AQ675

**Was £269 Now £159**

This four-ply cashmere pointelle knit jacket is an ingenious double act inspired by an original 50's piece. With large dyed to match buttons this cardigan is perfect for you whether you are harking back to your youth or wanting to look fabulously fifties. Available in 4 colours, sizes 8,10,12 & 14 with an average length of of 60cm.

**To buy this item select the colour and size by click the corresponding box below.**

**Key:**  
 In Stock  
  Low Stock  
  No. weeks wait  
  Out



	8	10	12
Black	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Felt	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Grape	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Redcurrant	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

<sup>i</sup> Jared Spool 2006. Does Search Need to be in the Upper Right?

<http://www.uie.com/brainsparks/2006/03/22/does-search-need-to-be-in-the-upper-right/>

<sup>ii</sup> OneStat have published data on the phrase length of key phrases entered into search engines since 2003. All the data is available from [http://www.onestat.com/html/aboutus\\_pressbox.html](http://www.onestat.com/html/aboutus_pressbox.html).

<sup>iii</sup> The 15 sites analysed for this article were Boden, Brightminds, Brora, Crew, Cotswold, Charles Tyrwhitt, Field & Trek, Flying Flowers, Gardening Direct, GLTC, Healthy Direct, Lakeland, Long Tall Sally, Smythsons, White Company. They were all selected because they were catalogue retailers with an e-commerce site.