



The **E-Commerce** SEO Playbook



E-Commerce websites - especially those with extensive catalogs of products - are among the most rewarding and challenging projects for an SEO professional.

The job means scaling improvements and optimizations across product listings, ensuring all of the products and categories you want to be indexed are surfaced to the searchbot, while simultaneously keeping an eye on mobile usability and page speed.

Like all SEO work, the key is having visibility into potential issues, knowing which audits to watch, what actions to prioritize, and which growth ideas are “nice to have” instead of “must have.” This white paper reviews most of the common challenges faced by e-commerce SEOs, and offers solutions and prioritizations among them.

Some of these struggles include:



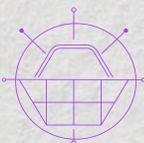
It takes a while for new products or product changes to appear in the Google index. Sometimes they never appear in search results. Products that are deep within the catalog may especially be susceptible to this fate.



Faceted navigation can make the searchbot waste its valuable time churning through minute differences between product listings, and can result in indexation of too many pages that are essentially the same.



If website content comes from the manufacturer of products, it may mean that product pages aren't unique enough to gain a foothold in organic results among other retailers with the same information.

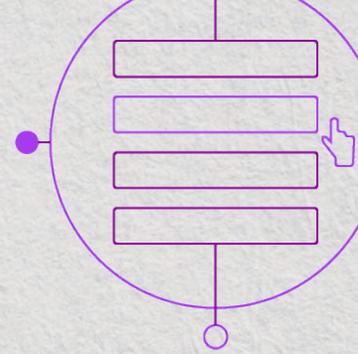


If the e-commerce site is also paired with retail brick-and-mortar locations, local SEO is also necessary.



Training and evangelizing SEO best practices across multiple teams and subgroups within a large organization is a crucial (and not particularly technical) requirement for long-term success.

Typical E-Commerce Site Structure



E-Commerce websites are usually built in roughly the same way. The good news about this is that these sites tend to have the same common problem areas and opportunities.



One important SEO best practice to keep in mind here is that it's best to have a single discrete landing page per topic, with its own URL, unique content, and properties.

This section highlights the various opportunities and challenges.

Product Pages

Individual product pages are an important set of pages on an e-commerce website. This is where product evaluation, comparison, and selection happen. This is where the customer clicks to add the product to the cart.

On a large e-commerce site, these product pages exist in vast quantities. While it might be feasible to do page-by-page optimizations on the top selling products on a website, it is usually not possible to have that level of hand curation and care across a hundred, a thousand, or more pages. If products go in or out of stock on a regular basis, this can result in a number of additional challenges to manage at scale.

The key areas of product pages include:



Page title and meta description



Product name



Product description and detailed specifications



Product images



Product pricing (and sale pricing)



Amount in stock



Product reviews

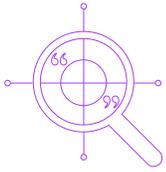


Product star rating / aggregate reviews



Breadcrumbs and related links

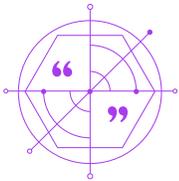
Examples of some SEO opportunities and challenges related to product pages include:



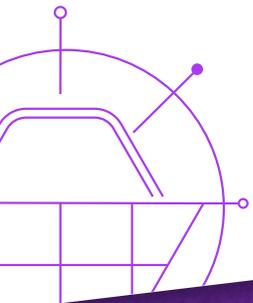
Long-tail search opportunities can be found by adding details to the Page Title and Meta Descriptions, in addition to the product name. Optimizing for high-intent searchers can get exactly what they are looking for by landing on this page.

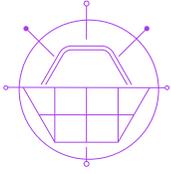


Images are an area of both opportunity and challenge. Large files that slow down page speed can be compressed without losing quality and served dynamically when appropriate by your CDN. Images without relevant alt-text, and images that aren't unique to a single website can all require attention and management. These areas of focus also help with rankings in image search, a common way for users to browse for items they are looking for.

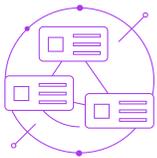


Aggregate reviews and star ratings are tricky to show on the page. It's important to be clear about where the review ratings and numbers come from on the page, and to report them accurately in the structured markup. When implemented with schema, reviews can add "rich snippet" visibility and social proof to organic Google listings and increase click-through rate (CTR).

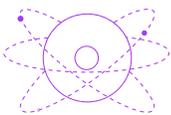




Though product pages are the most important pages on an e-commerce site, often they are buried behind the greatest number of clicks from the homepage. These “deep-links” for product pages means that Google may take a long time to discover, index and cache these pages, and might also take a long time to notice updates to them. Internal linking, careful management of product category pages, and search parameters can help ensure a site’s most valuable pages are treated like the MVPs they are.



A lot of sites use XML sitemaps to manage the internal linking challenges, however, again, with products going out of stock, sitemaps can be difficult to keep up to date. Visibility into inventory and sitemaps by product category can ensure coverage and management, getting all those crucial pages indexed.



Sometimes, because they are automatically generated based upon stock numbers and other database fields, product pages have URLs that are very hard to read. Ensuring that product page URLs are in easy-to-read and understand formats that mirror the product name and descriptions may help users better understand what the page is about and increase shareability, though Google has said there is no direct ranking benefit.

Categories, Subcategories, Search, and Filter



Because the product pages must be organized in some way, and users must be able to navigate among and between the products available, the next most important area of the site are the categories and product type pages and filters.

From the product pages, the categories and subcategories should be available in the breadcrumb.

The key areas of product category pages include:



Page title and meta description



Product category name



Product category description



Prioritized links to product pages



Breadcrumbs and related links

Product category pages target broader, higher-volume search terms. Because these terms tend to be in the sweet-spot between customer intention to buy and category-level search types that show a larger number of products per page, naturally, these are higher competition pages in search.

Descriptions on product category pages are one way to stand out from the competition. Frequently, out-of-the-box templates for these pages don't include a section for body copy. However, it's important to include some descriptive text and ground the search user in what kinds of products they are going to find within the category. This is a chance to contextualize and describe the larger group of products. It's also a great place to include key internal links.

Category pages tend to be linked more prominently on the website, perhaps on the top level nav or homepage. The URLs tend to change less frequently, but sometimes the URLs can still be automatically generated and harder to read. Creating easy-to-read URLs is one best practice for managing this kind of page.

Which leads us to one of the toughest pieces of managing SEO for an e-commerce website: faceted navigation.

Faceted navigation is the automatic, nearly-limitless creation of parameter-based URLs based on search terms, filters, and product categories, and it requires careful management.

When a user selects filter options, some websites generate entirely new URLs to display the products that meet that filter requirement. Sometimes, this creates category and landing pages in multiple iterations and levels of specificity that reflect the interests and requirements of potential customers. This can allow a website to create landing pages that are more specific than the general categories, and can create search traffic opportunities for customers who are highly interested in purchasing relevant products.

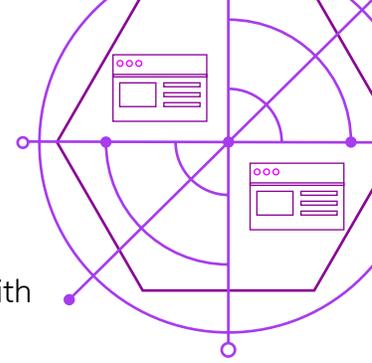
However, this opportunity is balanced out by a number of risks and complications.

- It's very hard to ensure that there are internal links and XML sitemap references surfacing these product category landing pages to the search bot.
- In terms of site architecture and internal links, it's hard to prioritize those links among/between one another.
- Because they are automatically generated, it's hard to ensure that these pages don't duplicate one another in terms of the products and content that appear on the page.
- The automated generation of URLs paired with the automated generation of internal links to those URLs can result in countless pages being created on a site that dilute the value of the higher-priority pages, and create "crawl traps" for searchbots - places where the bot is crawling relatively low-quality pages that aren't significantly different from one another.

The solution to faceted navigation is a delicate mix of content strategy and technical execution (see notes about JavaScript below). Once you have an idea of which pages are the most useful as landing pages, solving faceted navigation issues can both result in higher search traffic, but can also improve the number of pages search engines are crawling, indexing and caching on the site.

Cost-Per-Click metrics in keyword analytics can be useful for determining which keywords show a high rate of customer intention to purchase. Though there is no guarantee that conversion rates will be higher just because there is more competition for the term (which is based on how many companies want to rank for it), it's an indicator worth watching. The higher the cost, the more likely that term is a high-conversion term worth targeting!

Location Pages



If the business has brick and mortar stores, then the pages associated with individual retail locations are the next area of the e-commerce website.

The key areas of location pages include:



Page title and meta description



Location name



Contact information for location (address, phone)



Map / directions



Business hours



Star rating / aggregate ratings



Breadcrumbs and related links

SEO opportunities and challenges on location pages include:

- If business locations don't have their own websites, the location pages on the main website should be paired to separate Google My Business Accounts, and must have Name, Address, and Phone consistent with those accounts. These pages become the candidate to rank and appear in Google Maps modules and lists, and are important for navigational searches.
- When locations have their own websites, these location pages on the main website are more important for link flow, context, and Name, Address, and Phone consistency so that the location website has the "support" of the main brand for their Google Maps appearance.
- The nature of the beast is that content will be very similar across location pages. If it's possible to include detailed descriptive content about a location, area, or the differences in personality about an individual location, that's a great way to differentiate the locations for search users, and potentially surface for long-tail terms.
- Schema markup per location can be useful for differentiating and explaining the relationship between locations to Google.

Blogs / Buying Guides / Content Pages

Finally, a website might have blog pages or buying guides. It will certainly have content pages such as FAQ, a homepage, a returns policy, or an about page.

The key areas of content pages include:



Page title and meta description



Content, images and videos



Titles and subtitles



Breadcrumbs and related links

Naturally, content pages have the chance to surface in search results for terms that aren't necessarily related to intent to purchase. Buying guides can help capture customers who are searching with the intent of learning more information rather than purchasing immediately.

These pages can highlight:

- Comparison terms and topics (this product vs. that one)
- Features that are specific to products which are relevant search terms themselves
- Accessories or additional purchases / kits that might be useful to customers

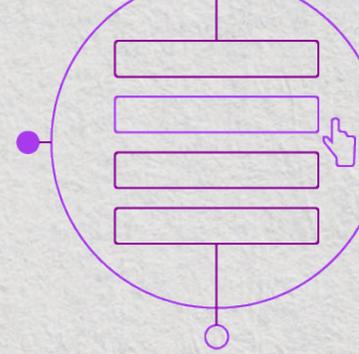
There are a number of places within content pages where schema markup can be useful.

- On the homepage, organization and website level schema markup is important. This can impact branded search results, and should be paired with the Google My Business details that you've entered for the company.
- On FAQ pages, additional schema markup can help long tail business related search topics surface in the results.

These pages are important to create trust and brand awareness with potential customers, or to create content marketing opportunities for traffic channels.

From an SEO perspective, the important thing to remember is internal linking and information architecture that retains a focus on important category and product pages.

Showing What You Want To Show, Hiding What You Want To Hide

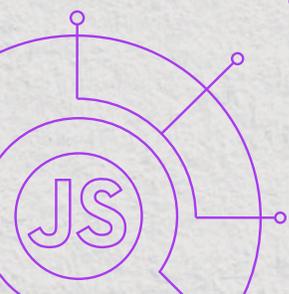


Google can crawl, execute, and render JavaScript (JS), and has been able to do so for several years. However, JS execution is resource-intensive. While Googlebot can see this information, it stores the data until it has a reason to render the page more fully. More often, the text-only, mobile-only bot is likely to be what is skimming the page - unless it sees big changes from the last render.

When JS rendering causes page speed to slow down, the Googlebot is even less likely to allocate the resources required to wait for a page to load. This is because a user is also unwilling to wait around. JS can be a mixed blessing in terms of page speed - it can be a huge improvement, or if done improperly, a cause for slow page loading times.

Because it renders the information in JS less frequently, links and content that appear exclusively within JavaScript elements appear to be given less value. This is something to be aware of when deciding upon technical implementation:

- Many product pages include JS elements - particularly the very important customer review information. By having this information loaded dynamically, it's possible that the unique, rich, relevant content found in the reviews is not surfaced on those pages. There are various ways to solve this, and SEOs have to know which elements on product and category pages are crawled less frequently due to JS implementations.
- When resolving the technical implementation of faceted navigation, implementing JS (as opposed to avoiding it) can reduce the creation of new URLs. By using the dynamic elements of JS to meet the user needs without creating multiple different pages, the challenges of faceted navigation can be managed. There is a trade-off to this, however, because the site does lose the ability to automatically target specific long-tail terms that might convert at higher rates. Trial and error, and prioritization of which elements to create dynamically, can be a large part of the long term solution.
- Internal links to recommended products or product categories are often generated automatically in a JS module and dynamically personalized for users. While this is fabulous for UX and often for conversion, these links don't pass a lot of SEO value. There's often a need to create a hybrid approach for internal links. Links that are in the body copy in the html are higher value.
- Don't forget the `<no script>` tag and other important text that should be available on the page. Alt text for images, descriptions, and video transcripts are all important elements that should be surfaced to the text-only bot every time it visits.



Standing Out in a Crowded Search Result Page

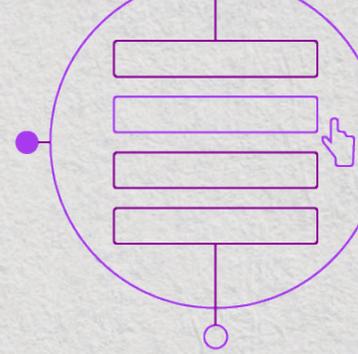


In addition to the more general Search Engine Result Page (SERP) features, such as breadcrumb information, a Local Map Pack, Image Carousels, Video Carousels, and People Also Ask boxes, there are a number of rich search result features that are specific to products and e-commerce sites. These sometimes include ratings, pricing, reviews, breadcrumbs, and product availability. These rich results can help your organic search listings stand out amidst the other products on the page.

How to influence the appearance of product page search results:

- Page titles don't have to match the product name. They can include additional phrases and descriptions that make your products stand out. These can improve click-through rates from organic searches.
- If your location pages are optimized, they will appear in Google Map Packs. Optimization means tying them to Google My Business accounts, and include schema markup for addresses, phone numbers, location details including business hours, etc.
- Image optimization includes the image filename, alt text, as well as image title and description. Images that aren't hidden behind JS loads are more likely to appear in search results.
- Video carousels are much like images. Optimizing for video search results includes the name of the video, as well as transcript information.
- For the product specific rich results, each product should include schema markup. Examples of the schema fields that should be included are:
 - name;
 - image;
 - description;
 - aggregateRating;
 - offers > price;
 - offers > priceCurrency

Being a Team Player: SEO as Part of a Larger Team



SEO drives revenue indirectly in most cases. Locations appearing in Map Packs help customers get to the store. It's very hard to track that user's path to purchase via organic search results pages, but it's obvious that it happens.

Non-SEO users might visit via ads, vendors, or other referral sources. Again, these users might see the ad, or interact with it, then return later via organic search or direct visit to make a purchase. Because of multi-device browsing and delays between ad impression and purchase, this too, might be difficult to track.

E-Commerce revenue is a little easier to track, so that tends to be where most of the KPIs and attention are focused. Users coming to the website via organic search might purchase products directly, might browse product recommendations and impulse buys from retail sales or promotions.

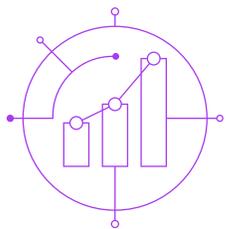
The product landing pages and product category pages and optimizations listed above play a large part in drawing potential customers to the website. Because good UX is also good SEO, the SEO team might also ensure that the path to purchase is easy to follow and conversion rates are optimized.

However, SEO is not the only part of this puzzle. UX, Marketing, Sales, Editorial, Design and Engineering are all doing their parts in the larger ecosystem of the website.



Everyone who can impact the content, display, or function of the website is “doing SEO” whether they realize it or not.

It's important for the variety of teams to understand SEO best practices where it applies to them. A few great ways to promote this include:



- Cross-functional and cross-departmental SEO training and best practices
- Google updates via “lunch and learns” to help everyone feel smarter about SEO
- Access to tools and reporting with key stakeholders
- Provide reports showing the success metrics for cross-team projects

There is a common thread to these ideas - because the SEO team is often one of the areas that is looking at the whole site as a functional ecosystem, there are often details and pieces of information that only the SEOs understand. This is a valuable resource that is made more valuable by sharing it across teams.

Prioritizing SEO Projects for E-Commerce



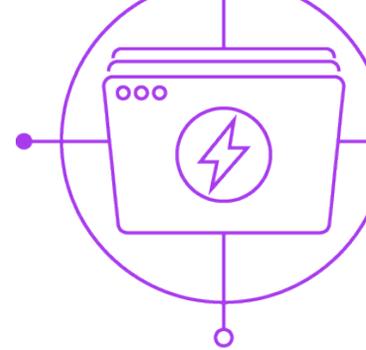
SEO audits tend to be a long list of things that need to be improved on a website, without the additional context of how much work each thing takes, or how much return the company will see on the investment of time and effort to improve it.

Usually, the design, engineering, and editorial resources that are required to improve the SEO on a site are shared across multiple business teams and have competing (and sometimes conflicting!) goals. SEO is in a unique position to help prioritize these.

Individual projects might include detailed metrics such as increasing CTR from Google, or increasing visibility in image carousels and traffic to product pages as a result. But the bottom line in all of these cases is that the goal of the business is to increase product sales. If possible, an “apples to apples” comparison of conversion and sales improvement by project can often help stakeholders determine which projects take priority.

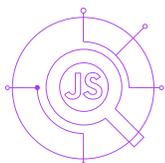
Of course, if the customers cannot find pages (e.g. they are not being indexed), then any increase is a significant increase. Another way to weigh priority would be the number of pages impacted by the project. For this reason crawl improvements can take priority over goals that more directly affect conversion.

Get the Information You Need to Make Decisions



Before any of these priorities can be set, however, the SEO team has to be able to see what is going on across the site and to assess potential problem areas. The team might know that it takes a while for product updates to get indexed, or for key pages to appear in the index at all, but they might not know why.

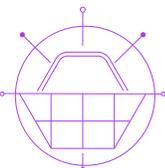
The Botify e-commerce tools are here to help. www.botify.com/solutions/e-commerce



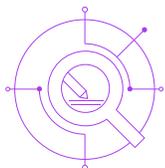
Crawl and render your JavaScript at 100 URLs/second. Quickly pinpoint slow-loading resources, how your content looks pre and post-rendering, and perform device-specific JavaScript analysis.



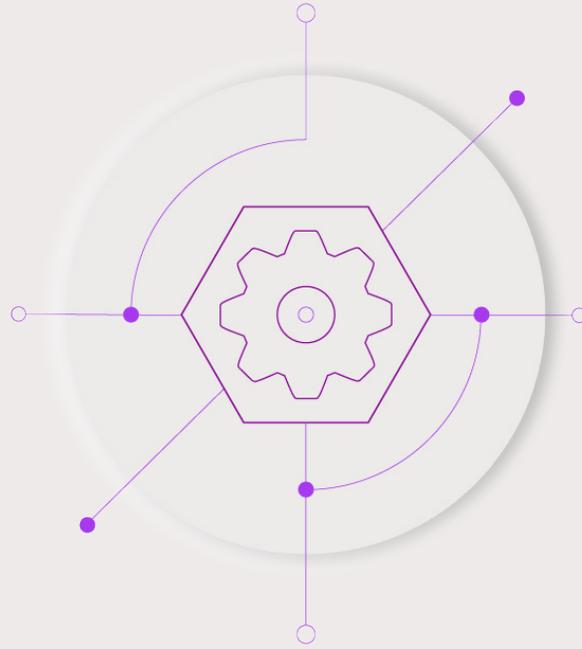
Identify faceted navigation issues & other crawl traps. Direct search engines away from unimportant pages and to your key pages by using Botify to identify which pages they're crawling vs. missing.



Manage out-of-stock products & get new products indexed quickly. Get the data you need to inform your out-of-stock product page strategy, as well as the ability to create accurate, up-to-date sitemaps.



Organize your data by product category, template, and more. Segments help you group your pages into logical groups, making it easy to pinpoint where issues occur on your website, as well as drill down to view that specific segment's / page type's ranking keywords, content quality, and more.



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