SearchPilot

What Should Retail Marketing Leaders Be Thinking About In Organic Search Right Now?

We work with large retailers who give us insight into their priorities. To help them prepare for the future, we like to focus on what's next in search.

At SearchPilot, our expertise is in search engine optimization (SEO). While this point of view (PoV) covers broader topics like data privacy and analytics, we'll focus on the SEO angle in these areas. I sat down to write this with the idea that I wanted to answer the question, *"When it comes to organic search and SEO, what should retail marketing leaders be thinking hardest about right now?"*

I've split my thoughts into five key sections, starting, unsurprisingly, with artificial intelligence (AI):

1. What does AI mean for online retail strategy?

2. Google as a Product Listing Page (PLP)

3. SEO depreciation

4. Data sources, privacy, and regulation

5. How retailers are measuring success

1. What does AI mean for online retail strategy?

From an SEO perspective, there are two main areas to think about when it comes to AI:

1. The use of AI and machine learning (ML) tools to build, analyze, and improve our websites, our competitors' websites, and the market as a whole
2. Consumers' use of AI tools to find and choose between the products and retailers they are interested in (referred to in the industry as "AI SEO")

There is another significant and interesting topic to think about in the long term. That is if Google struggles to compete in the ongoing arms race between search quality and "slop" — the content that isn't *exactly* spam but is low-quality and machine learning (ML) generated. Depending on how technology changes, this could threaten training ML models in general. For the sake of this article, though, we will concentrate on the two sub-topics outlined above.

How should we use AI and ML tools to improve our websites?

AI doesn't pose a major short-term threat to most retailers' business models. It isn't going to ship physical products to customers anytime soon, for example. So, using AI is a fairly tactical decision.

We have **written in detail about the current state of AI in search** and the results of our experiments in improving web pages in this way. Strategically, retailers should be guided by whether **users** prefer pages enhanced by AI to whatever the alternative is. In our opinion, it's okay to make this decision based on alignment with brand values, user experience (UX), and experimental results. Our broadest lesson is that it tends to be most successful when it is used to scale and expose proprietary and differentiated data in user-friendly formats.

What should we do about consumers' use of "AI SEO"?

The biggest insight for retail market leaders considering what to do about consumers turning to AI tools for recommendations is to realize that *regular* **Google search** is the biggest AI-powered discovery tool in the world (and nothing else comes close).

Once you accept that "regular" search (and, in turn, "regular" SEO) is, in fact, the biggest form of "AI SEO," we get to the secondary insight. On-site SEO strategy needs to focus on appealing to Google's AI engine.

I wrote more about this in detail in my **briefing for leadership on AI SEO** and discussed it in depth in **this presentation**.

The key takeaways are as follows:

1. Our "AI SEO" strategy right now is almost entirely about what we do for Google
2. Our approach for Google needs to be guided by the realization that it's AI-powered now.

Both of these takeaways contribute to our **belief in the power of SEO A/B testing**.

2. Google's role as a PLP

Two key page types appear in most search results for commercial intent searches:

1. **Product Detail Pages (PDPs)** — the individual products themselves
2. **Product Listing Pages (PLPs)** — sometimes known as category pages, these are filterable and sortable lists of all products of a certain kind

Google has typically shown one or the other depending on the best understanding of the searcher's intent. PDPs appeared for more specific searches and PLPs for more general searches. The current trend is for PDPs to be shown more prominently at the expense of PLPs — seemingly, with Google wanting to **be** the PLP itself. You can see this trend most clearly by comparing the current UK search results to the US search results for a general product query:
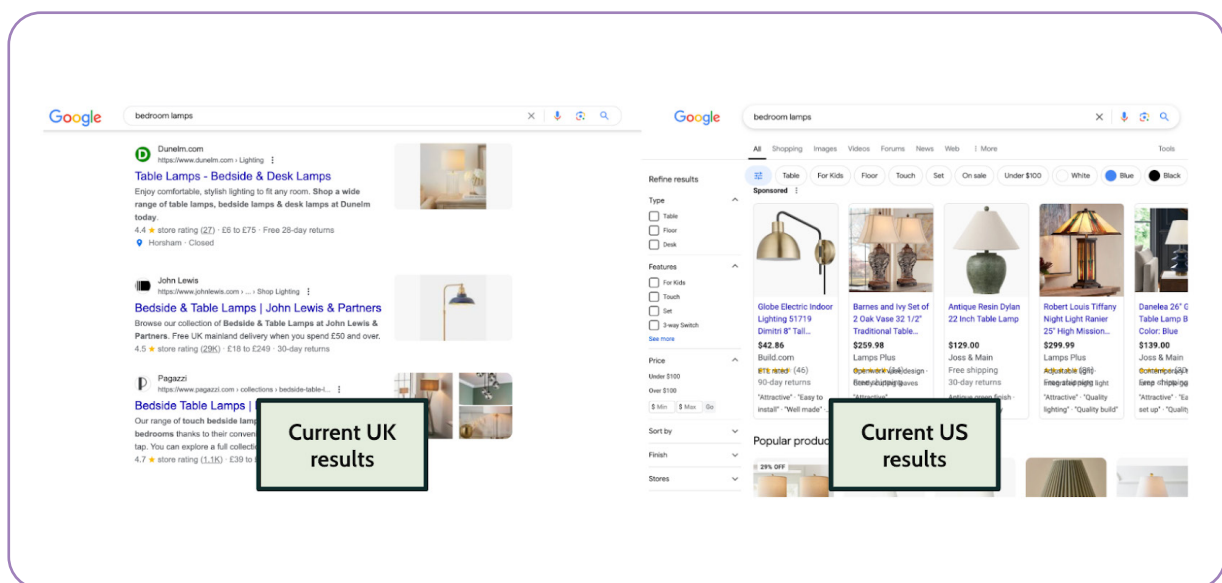
Caption: Image that compares UK search results to US search results

The UK results are similar to the previous presentation style globally, while the US results, with filters and sort options, is more like a listing page of their own.

Both of these screenshots are in the regular ("all") results tab but are trending towards looking more like the "shopping" results tab. The implication of this is that retailers should be thinking about **three** key and distinct sources of organic product search traffic. These include:

1. Regular "ten blue links" results containing links to PDPs (and sometimes PLPs), often marked up with product schema information and showing as rich snippets
2. Shopping tab results that look like organic product adverts that drive traffic from the Merchant Center product feed and can include non-canonical product variations(e.g. size and colour variations) or noindex pages that don't appear in regular search results
3. Product search results like those seen on the shopping tab appearing in a grid in the regular search results, often labelled things like "popular products"

It is particularly interesting to track and report on these for two reasons:

1. Search Console reports only on #1 and #3 right now, with no click or visibility data for the shopping tab. The documentation isn't always clear on this but the **shopping tab listings report** links over to Merchant Center.
2. Analytics data will only be able to distinguish clicks on product listings (#2 and #3) from regular web search (#1) if you link Merchant Center to your analytics. You can find the **GA4 instructions here**.

While this data can be easy to undercount or misinterpret, it is critically important due to the increasing trend of product search inclusion in regular results.

3. SEO depreciation

The changes I described in product search are just one example of a more general trend: there is more change in search results than ever before.
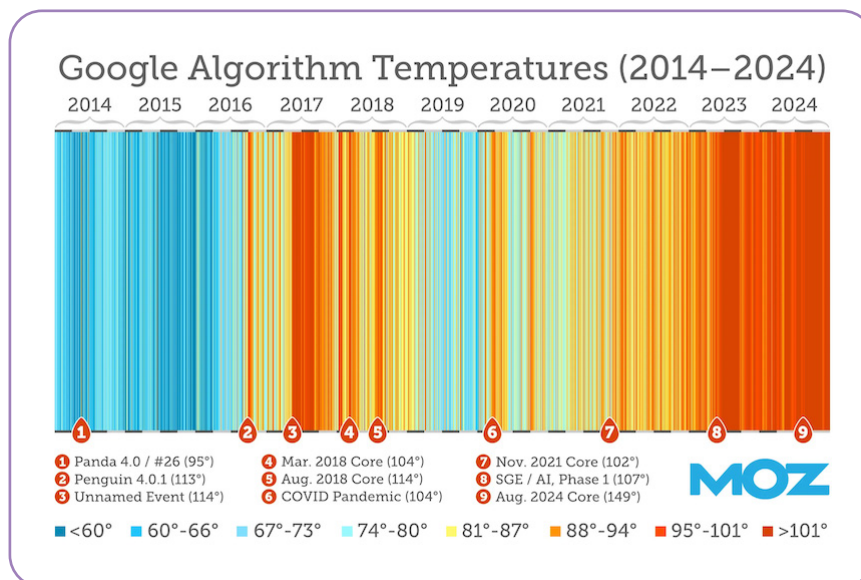

Caption: Google algorithm temperatures. Image credit to Dr. Pete at Moz.

When I speak to retail marketing leaders, I often hear two conflicting things:

1. If we did nothing, and made no investment in SEO, we would expect our performance to decline.
2. We measure the return on our SEO investment by comparing the spend to our year-over-year (YoY) growth.

The second point leads to systematic underinvestment in SEO, because it misses the value of the effort expended to continue to benefit from the large amount of organic visibility big retailers **already have**. Organic visibility is an asset, and SEO done right is an investment that **maintains** and grows that asset. Despite acknowledging the need for maintenance, the focus on YoY performance systematically ignores it.

Based on our research and data, a **decline of up to 10-20% per year** is a reasonable model for what would happen with no investment:
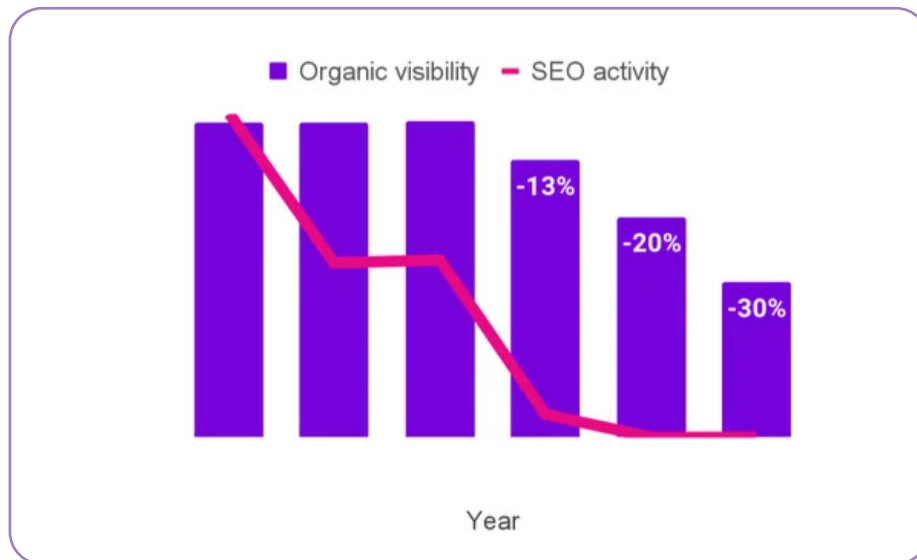
Caption: A graph that shows YoY decline

I have referred to this concept as **SEO depreciation** and it's a key insight for planning, budgeting, and target-setting for the organic channel.

4. Data sources, privacy, and regulation

Analytics has been the source of truth for most retailers for as long as I've been working with the web. I have **talked before** about why we consider traffic data to be more important than rankings alone for measuring the results of SEO experiments, and while both parts remain true, the situation is growing increasingly complicated.

Privacy regulations are the main reason for this shift. In many regions, the cookies that analytics tools rely on to track sessions require users' explicit consent. Even in jurisdictions where this is not the case, many large organizations are choosing to treat them this way — either to be completely sure of compliance in the jurisdictions where it is required, or in anticipation of stricter regulations in other markets.

While it is possible to implement privacy-preserving "hits based" analytics that doesn't tie sessions together, many analytics tools simply don't count any visits where the cookie is rejected. Confusingly, **GA4 looks like it's tracking them, but visitors who don't accept cookies aren't actually tracked in the data**.

Unlike product search trends led by the US, privacy regulations in the UK and Europe are making a bigger difference to how retailers track and measure data — sometimes with unintended consequences.

The upshot of all of this is that many retailers are finding that their analytics data is much more of a sample than it used to be. Since it's a non-random sample, it can be more limited in its value for measurement and testing than it once was.

We're seeing a rise in the use of measurement tools that either don't require cookies at all or piggy-back on the cookie permissions of the internet giants — most notably Google Search Console. This is why we have **built Search Console integration into SearchPilot**.

As I mentioned above in the discussion of measuring product search, Search Console has its own limitations. In addition to those mentioned above, this includes sampling and a lack of conversion data. So, we are seeing a trend towards measurement that relies on a range of tools focused on different jobs rather than a single source of truth.

5. How are retailers measuring success?

Another big measurement trend we are seeing is in how large retailers think about what success looks like. We are seeing it become increasingly common for them to focus on:

1. Performance **relative to competitors**
2. Segmented **performance by business unit** or product type

The kind of experimentation we do at SearchPilot can improve both of these. We are more and more thinking about business unit segmentation during test design. In particular, we think about hypotheses that apply to specific groups or product areas. We design **smart bucketing** that takes account of the segmented analysis we want to run, and we report on the impacts by business unit.

Relative performance is a particularly interesting one. A large part of the reason we run **controlled experiments** is to isolate the impact of specific changes to improve performance. Measuring performance relative to competitors over longer time periods is the equivalent of this approach when applied to company performance as a whole.

When the whole market shifts (for example, when Google makes changes like the product search changes discussed above), it may be impossible to be unaffected. The interesting question is often whether you did better than others who started in a similar position to you.

Getting more insights from SearchPilot

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