Give them what they want:

Match Customers with the Products They're Searching For

Site search is one of merchants' most important tools for helping customers find and purchase products through their online stores. However, many merchants' site search tools don't fulfill the promise of delivering meaningful results. Learn how to use your website's site search data to better understand your customers, their needs and their intent, and how to properly leverage site search to help customers find what they're searching for.

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Introduction

The average conversion rate for B2C eCommerce websites is just three percent.

Merchants have made numerous investments in modern web designs, compelling product descriptions, photography and merchandising. Still, they're only able to get three people out of every hundred that visit their websites to complete a purchase. Retailers must heavily and continuously invest in pricey demand generation channels like SEM, PPC, Display, as well as Affiliate Marketing. It's a highly competitive environment where online mega merchants like Walmart and Amazon make it difficult to grow and succeed on just a three percent conversion.

2013 Conversion Rate

2012 Conversion Rate
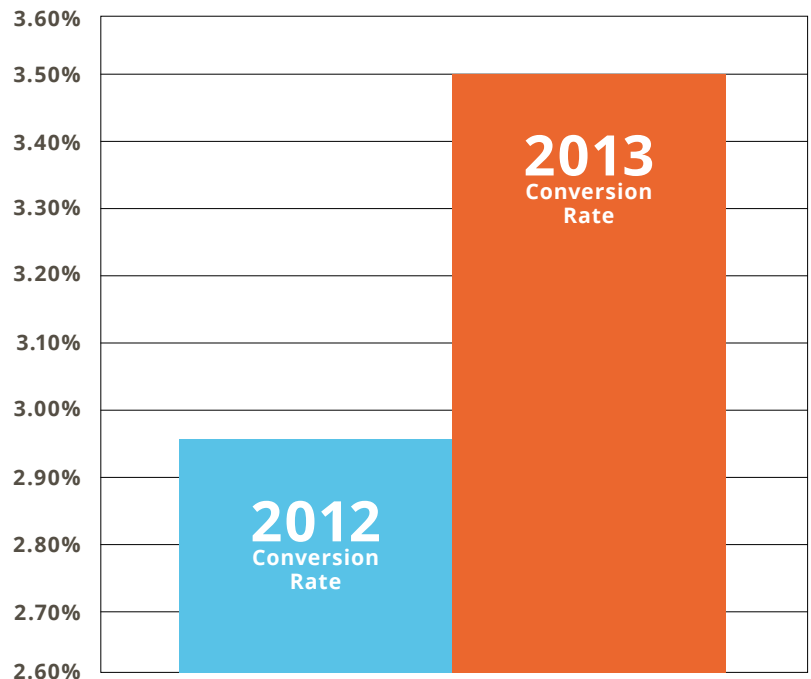
Source: *Monetate eCommerce Quarterly Roundup, Q4 2013*

So why are conversion rates so low? Simple: Customers can't find what they're looking for. More than any other reason, customers buy online to save time. It's fast and easy. But to realize the convenience benefit of shopping online they need to find what they're looking for, and fast. 97% of customers leave your site without purchasing because they struggle to find the product they want to buy quickly and easily.

The key to solving the conversion problem is figuring out what customers want and how to help them find what they're looking for quickly and easily. Site search is the best tool for figuring out both. According to market research conducted by eConsultancy, up to 40% of website visitors use site search, and visitors who do use search convert at a rate 50% greater than those who do not utilize search. Not only can a well-implemented site search solution help customers find the products they want on your website, but it can also provide you with powerful insights into your customers' wants, needs and intent. Together, site search can dramatically improve your store's conversion rate, as well as strengthen other key operating metrics.

Part I

Site Search as a Treasure Chest of Valuable Customer Insights

Unlike website analytics that provide numeric-driven information about customer behavior, site search data provides actionable insights about what customers actually want and how they go about looking for what they need. Ahead are five key data points you should be able to collect from your site search tool and the insights you can learn from them.

Keywords & Products

What terms are your visitors searching for most frequently on your site? These are the products your visitors are most interested in and associate most closely to your site and brand.

There are three key insights to gain from keyword and product search results. First, this data can help inform your merchandising strategy for your website. Are the most frequently searched products easy to find on your website? Make sure that these are the products that customers see on your home page, landing pages and category pages. Optimize your site search for these terms so your visitors get meaningful results when they search for them.

The second level of insight from product and keyword data looks into your search engine marketing strategy. Site search terms can provide lists of valuable keyword you can use for both discoverability through organic search (SEO), as well as to acquire new traffic through paid search (SEM). Does your site show up on the first page of organic search results on Google and Bing for the most frequently searched terms on your site? Can you reduce your SEM per click and per acquisition costs by running ads for these products and/or keywords?

The third key insight you can learn from keyword and product search data is how to structure your product mix. Search query volume can serve as a proxy for demand and help merchants determine how much inventory to carry for a given product.

Product Attributes

Product attributes is one of the greatest areas of insight you can gain from search. Looking at product attributes will help you understand the language and adjectives customers use in their searches and how they map to how you describe your products.

For example, your wood furniture may come in colors including 'espresso,' 'mocha' and 'java' but customers are likely searching for colors like brown and black. Knowing how customers search will help you tag your products with the right terms so that they can be found through search. This information can also help inform the development of your customer personas and ensure that your website content and product descriptions are consistent with the linguistic profile of your personas.

Null Results & Exit Queries

Null results are searches that don't yield any accurate results (maybe you simply don't carry 'aircraft wheels' on your shoes website), while exit queries are queries that caused the visitor to leave the site from the search results page. These data can be immensely valuable in identifying new products to stock as customers expect to find them on your site. They will also help you identify weaknesses in your current search tool. If customers are exiting from the search results page on your site, it likely means that your results are not matching to what they're searching for, or you just don't carry the product.

Points of Origin

Not only can search data provide you with valuable insights, but you can also learn a tremendous amount from search origins. Search origins tell you where on your site customers are initiating searches. This data can help you identify where your site lacks clarity for your visitors. For example, if most of your searches are initiated from your category pages, then it's possible that your product categorization and/or taxonomy is not intuitive for customers. This means they're not finding the products they expect to find in the categories they're looking at.

Internationalization / Localization Opportunities and Strategies

The Internet extends merchants' reach to almost anywhere in the world, but even in our flat, hyper connected world; local differences are hugely significant. Even among countries with shared languages there can be tremendous cultural differences that greatly affect how customers from each country search for products. Here, too, site search can provide merchants with data showing differences in search patterns across countries and languages. A great search tool will be able to deliver meaningful results no matter the demographic or geographic language they use to search your site.

Part II

Site Search as a Conversion Tool

Not only is site search an invaluable source of insight into customer intent, but once we've developed these insights, we can also leverage site search to make these insights actionable to driver greater website conversion.
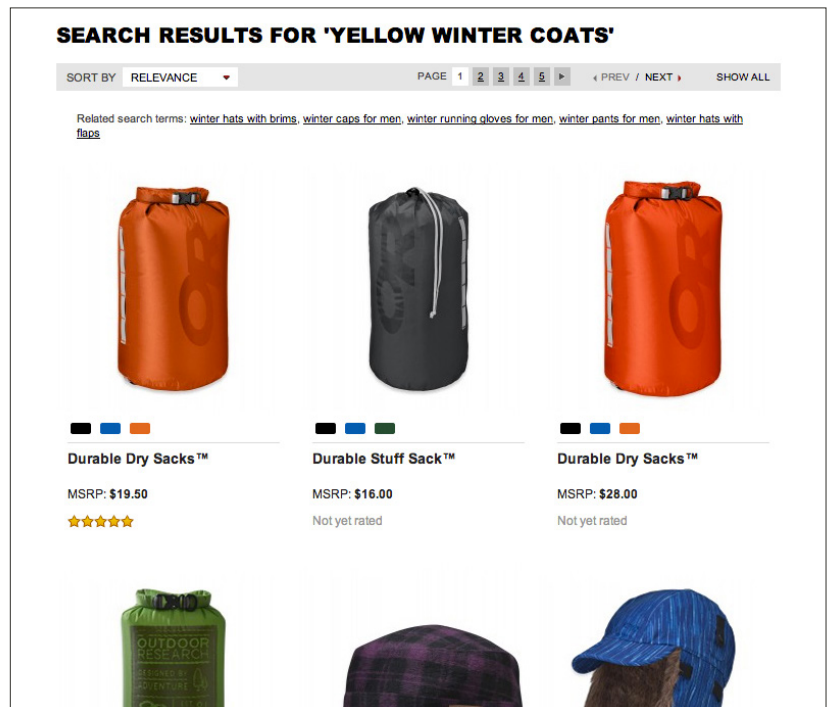
The key to driving increased conversion from search is understanding customer intent. Remember the children's game of telephone? Each round starts with someone whispering a message into the ear of the child next to them. The message is passed from one to the next, with each whispering the message in their neighbor's ear until the message reaches the last child in the group. The end result is the message announced by the final child bears little resemblance to the original message.

For online store visitors, site search can feel like a game of telephone; the products displayed in search results can bear little resemblance to what they've searched for. While telephone might be a fun game for children, online shoppers in a hurry will just move on to your competitor's site.

Site Search as a Conversion Tool

Check out at this example from an online retailer that sells outdoor apparel and gear. In the results seen to the right, searching for 'Yellow Winter Coats' yields the following.

The irony of these search results is that not only are there no yellow winter coats among the first few products displayed, but the items are neither yellow nor a coat. Why does this happen? Does the merchant not sell yellow winter coats? Of course it does. So why can't the site search tool match the customer to products they're seeking?

SEARCH RESULTS FOR 'YELLOW WINTER COATS'

SORT BY RELEVANCE ▾   PAGE 1 2 3 4 5 ►   ◄ PREV / NEXT ►   SHOW ALL

Related search terms: winter hats with brims, winter caps for men, winter running gloves for men, winter pants for men, winter hats with flaps

Durable Dry Sacks™   Durable Stuff Sack™   Durable Dry Sacks™

MSRP: $19.50   MSRP: $16.00   MSRP: $28.00

★★★★★   Not yet rated   Not yet rated

The Fundamental Problems with Site Search

There are three underlying problems preventing site search from matching customers with a relevant set of products they're seeking:

Problem 1: Merchandisers think about brands and product, not customers.
Most marketers and merchandisers, who create content and promote their products, take an inside out, product-centric approach to marketing. They think in terms of product attributes and features and they focus on that specifically. Increasingly marketers are obsessed with creating brand experiences, and try to weave the underlying themes of those experiences into their product descriptions. This is often not the way customers think about products, and therefore not the way they search for products. You might position your jacket as a camping jacket or a hiking jacket, but the customer may looking for a winter jacket to keep him warm every day, not just the one time per year they go camping. This gap between how *you* talk about your products versus how your *customers* search for products makes it hard for site search tools to match customers to relevant search results. This is why looking at product, product attribute and keyword data from your site search tool is critical.

Problem 2: Most site search solutions do not understand customer intent or language.
The largest gap in site search is the limitation in how most site search solutions work. Most site search platforms rely on content indexing. This means that they crawl the content of a page and record each word that appears on the page and the number of times it shows up on the page. When a user searches the site, the search engine looks up in its index for the pages that have the greatest instances of the words being searched.

In our 'yellow winter jackets' example, the search engine didn't understand what the customer was searching for, and it wasn't able to look at the search phrase is its entirety and understand its meaning. Rather, it just read the raw inputs of 'yellow' and/or 'winter' and/or 'jackets' and looked for all pages that have any of those words or any combination. The nine products displayed on the results page are likely connected to the 'winter' keyword, but have nothing to do with 'yellow winter jackets.' Like in our game of telephone, the search engine does not understand the message and breaks the chain between the merchant and the customer.

Problem 3: Language can get in the way.
Language is highly dynamic and largely influenced by geography and culture. In the U.S., we may drink a 'soda,' 'pop' or 'Coke', depending on where in the country we're from, and they all mean the same thing. A sandwich might be referred to as a 'sub,' 'hero,' 'hogie,' 'grinder,' 'wedge' or 'spuckie.' These are just examples within one country. Language differences grow exponentially as your cross international lines.

Unfortunately, most site search tools do not support **Natural Language Search**. This means they are not able to understand that when a customer from the UK searches for parts for their 'lorry,' they really mean their 'truck.' With the sophistication of today's consumers, your site search tool needs to be intelligent enough to understand what customers are searching for in order to display meaningful, relevant results.
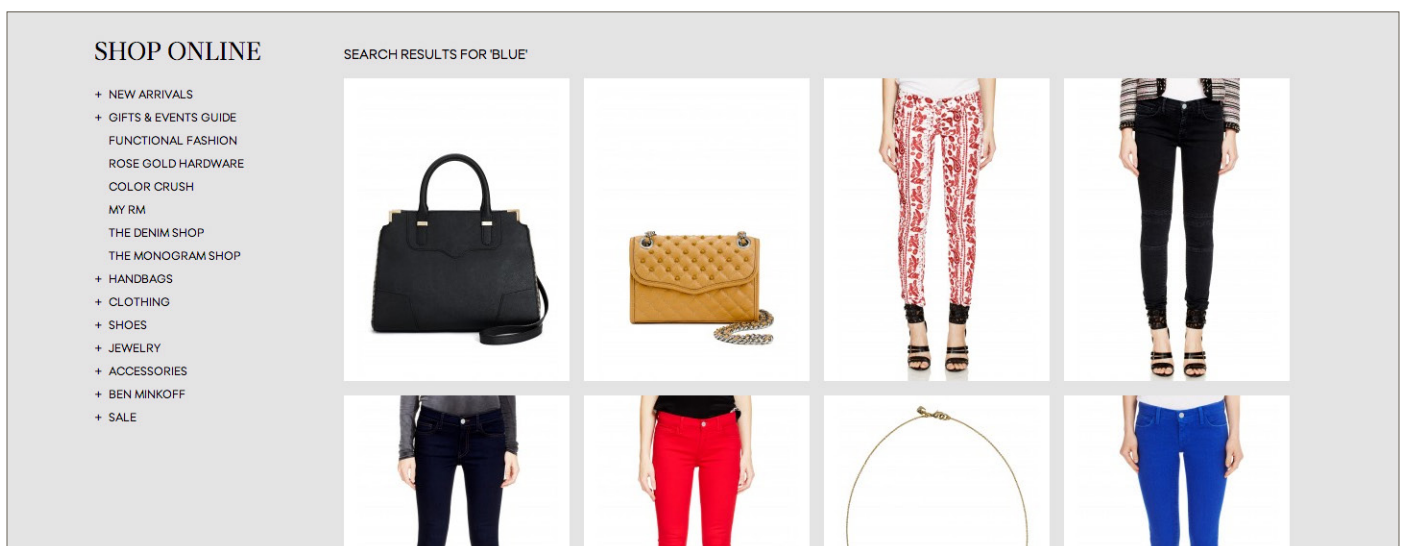
**Problem 4: Larger catalogs Add complexity site search.**

As retailers look for growth opportunities, one strategy they continually look to is increasing their site selection. With more precise demand forecasting, on-demand manufacturing and the proliferation of drop-shipping relationships, merchants are able to radically increase the breadth and depths of their catalogs, without having to invest heavily in costly warehouse space and inventory. A recent study of more than 4,000 merchants by MarketingSherpa showed that almost half of the merchants studied carry less than 1,000 skus in their catalog. Many of those merchants boasting catalogs of 10,000 skus or more.

While larger catalogs offer merchants the opportunity to serve a broader set of customers and increase AOV, merchants can only realize these benefits if their customers can find the products they're seeking. Larger sku catalogs make it hard for most site search tools to deliver relevant results as their keyword density model for ranking pages breaks down on sites where many keywords are common across multiple products. Using our 'yellow winter jackets' example, the site search tool sees so many products related to winter, that those are the only product results it is able to return for the search query.

Problem 5: Customer search habits are changing.

As customers get increasingly sophisticated and savvy in using web-based tools to conduct research and shop, and they are utilizing search-based tools in very different ways than they have in the past. Rather than searching with short 2-3 word phrases, customers are now using phrases that are 6-8 words on average. Google, in its 2013 Panda release revised its SEO algorithm so that it can serve as an 'answer engine' rather than just a search engine, encouraging users to search by asking full sentence questions.

As customers increase the length and complexity of their search queries the traditional site search model of mapping results to keyword density falls apart. In this world of multi-word and full sentence searches, site search tools must be able to understand the true intent of the customer to deliver meaningful and relevant search results that will get the customers to the products they're searching for.
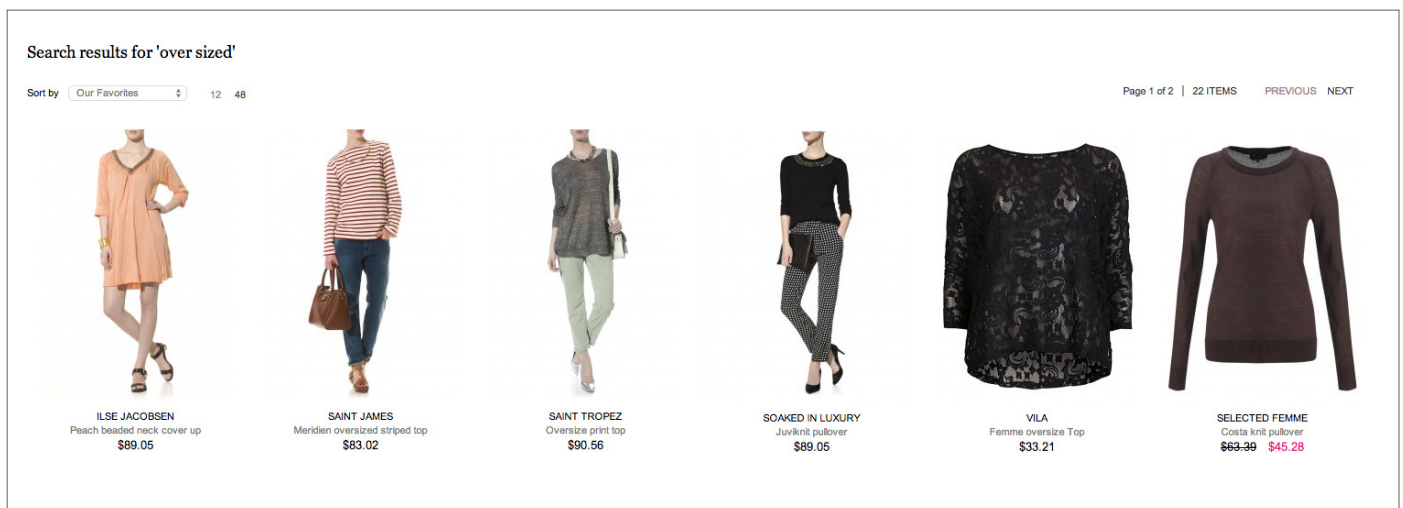
Part III

3 Recommendations for Increasing Conversion through Site Search

Adopt semantic search.

Unlike traditional site search tools, semantic search platforms are able to understand the meaning of your customers' search queries. Semantic platforms can distinguish between product names/terms, product attributes, and expression related to price, product or personal term. By understanding intent, semantic search can deliver much more relevant results to your customers' search queries.

Most importantly, semantic search platforms bridge the divide that separates how you talk about your products from how customers search for them. Semantic search is smart enough to know that when a customer searches for 'brown baby cribs' to display the 'mocha' colored baby furniture. As customer's search queries increase in length and sophistication, leveraging a semantic search platform that is incredible customer experiences.

AutoComplete Common Search Terms.

Search autocomplete is the process of finishing a customer's search query for them. For example, if a customer starts typing 'rain.' your search tool should autocomplete to 'rain coats.' If the customer continues typing 'rain b' the search engine would update the autocomplete to 'rain boots.' Auto completes help the customer by guiding them towards search terms which you know will deliver meaningful results.

Taking this concept one step further, you can also display recommended results inside the search box that match to the autocompleted search queries, enabling customers to click directly into a product's detail page without having to look through a search results page. This practice is hugely helpful in increasing website conversion.
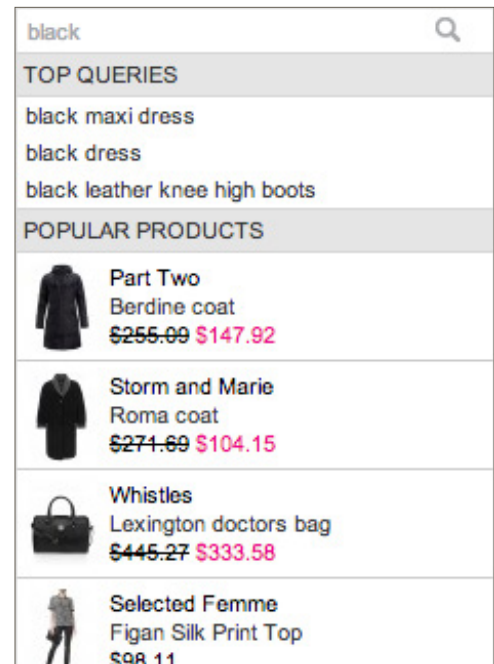

Provide search recommendations.

Customers often do not know what they're looking for. Constructing a search phrase that will help them find what they need may be challenging. Here is your opportunity to demonstrate your product category expertise and serve as a trusted advisor to your customer. Provide customers with search suggestions. These are search terms that customers can use to find products.

You can provide customers with a list of frequently used search terms, or examples of search terms. By guiding customers towards recommended searches, you can help bridge the divide that prevents customers from finding what they are looking for, and ensure they get meaningful, relevant products from their searches. This leads to customers finding the products they're looking for, which in turn leads to a greater sales conversion.

In the example to the right, the site search tool makes search term and product recommendations when a customer types the word 'black' into the search box.
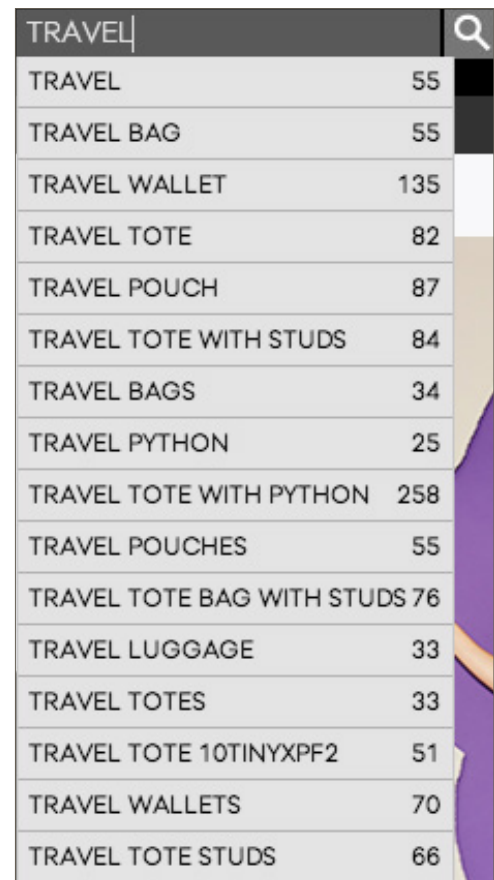
How Do you Know How Your Site Search is Currently Performing?

For merchants to be able to optimize their site search tools and leverage them to drive increased conversion, they must understand how their site search is performing.

What percentage of searches yield no results or a website exit?

What percentage of searches result in a click to a product detail page (CTR)?

What is the average time it takes to load a search result? Customers are impatient and expect near instant results!

How accurate are your search results? Are you getting fooled by your own search?

When looking at your website analytics, create a distinct customer segment for visitors who use search. Look at your core operating metrics for visitors using search versus visitors overall. What is this segment's pages per visit, time on site, conversion rate and average order value? If your site search is working as it should, these customers should be converting at between 50% - 300% better than your site average.

Conclusion

Website conversion is all about helping customers find the products they're looking for and delivering a great value proposition for those products. Site search can be a powerful tool for helping merchants understand what customers search for, what they're finding and what they desire. Use this information to help inform your demand generation and merchandising strategy. Site search can also be used as a powerful conversion optimization tool.

Leverage your site search to help customers find what they seek by understanding what they mean. Additionally, provide guidance through search suggestions and product recommendations to help them get to their desired products more quickly. By leveraging your site search for customer insights and optimizing search to serve as a conversion tool, you can significantly increase your overall website conversion rates.
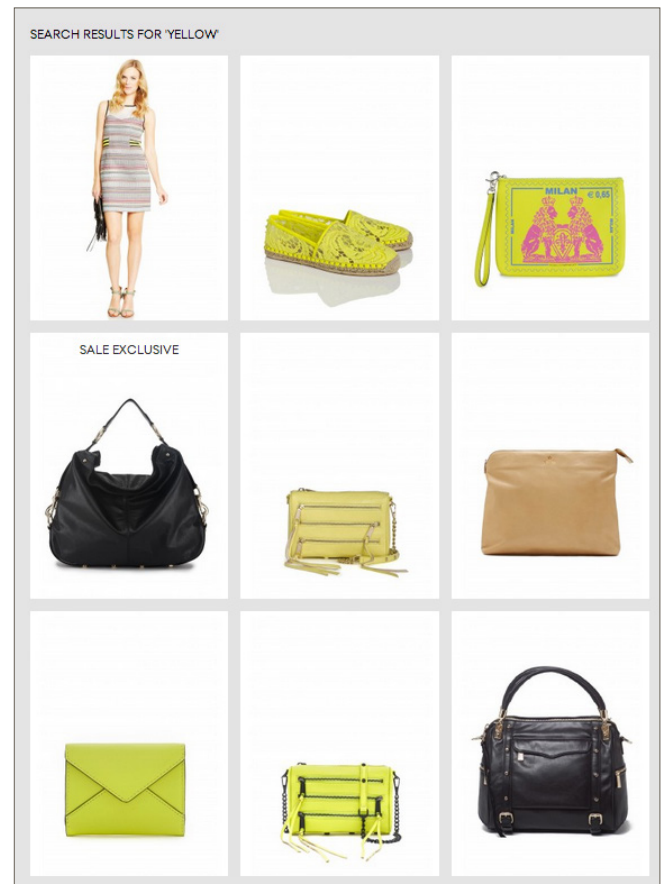
About Magento

Magento offers flexible, scalable eCommerce solutions designed to help you grow and succeed online. Our cost-effective technology platform makes it possible for you to control the content, functionality, look and feel of your online store. Magento is owned by eBay Inc., a global leader in eCommerce with a wealth of experience and resources in commerce-related technologies. To learn more about how Magento Enterprise Edition can help you grow your online business, visit **magento.com/enterprise**.

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With more than 700 eCommerce customers around the world, Celebros is the expert in commerce site search. Their hosted Conversion Pro suite enables internet retailers to easily extract key insights from their customers site search activity, as well as dramatically increase their website conversion rates, all without owning or running their own software. To learn more about how Celebros can help you increase your website conversion rates and to see a live demonstration, please visit **celebros.com**.