E-COMMERCE AUDIT
50 TOP RETAILERS

A BENCHMARK STUDY

NordicClick

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for your interest in our 2017 Retail E-Commerce Benchmark Study. We hope that you find it interesting, engaging, and most importantly – actionable guidance for your own e-commerce business.

As with any study, we found things that:

- Completely surprised us

- Didn't surprise us at all

- Inspired us

- Made us really scratch our heads

E-Commerce accounted for 8.4% of TOTAL retail sales in Q3 2017. That is an increase of 15.5% (+1.1%) from Q3 2016 while total retail sales increased 4%. So the bottom line here is that e-commerce continues to grab a bigger chunk of the pie.
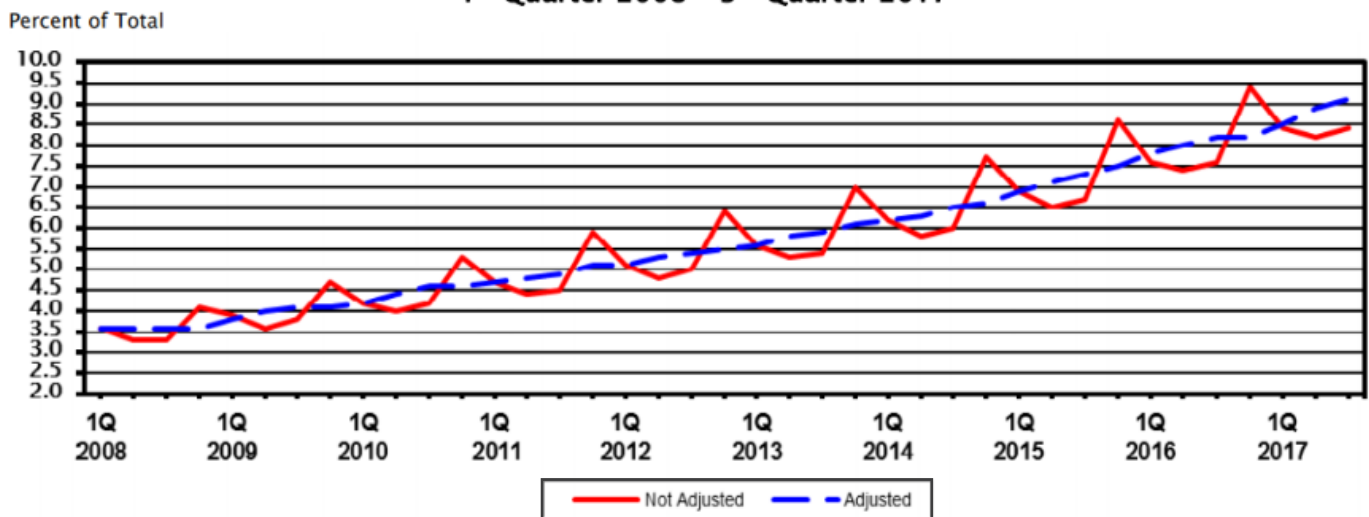

Figure 1 US Department of Commerce data

Please read on and enjoy!

> Adam Proehl; *Partner & Co-Founder*
> NordicClick Interactive

BACKGROUND & METHODOLOGY

As a Digital Marketing Agency, NordicClick works with a lot of clients on their e-commerce strategy and marketing. We frequently conduct e-commerce audits to help our clients understand where they're at, but more importantly, where they could be. Our audit covers a whole host of areas from the initial store home page all the way through to post purchase (and everything in between).

When presenting the findings of an audit, we're often asked, "Well how do we compare? Are we doing good? Bad? How well do big guys do? Who's doing it well?" And so on. Given those inquiries, we got curious, too. So, we decided to find out.

Armed with our basic e-commerce audit, we analyzed the websites of the top retailers in the US to see how they stack up with what we've learned to be the best practices to follow. With that in mind, we came up with a plan to accomplish just that. The elements of the study were as follows:

The Audit

Use as much of our e-commerce audit template as we possibly can. With access to ONLY the public facing websites, we were limited in scope. Our full audit contains far greater breadth and depth as well as subjective analysis.

For this study, we limited the audit checklist to that which we could answer either a "yes," "no," or "Not Applicable (N/A)."

Product Display Page (PDP)				
Checklist Item	\multicolumn{3}{c}{**Circle One**}		**Notes / Comments**
Is item availability clearly displayed?	Y	N	N/A	
Can items be backordered and is that specified along with an ETA?	Y	N	N/A	
Is "Ships within XX days" messaging clearly displayed?	Y	N	N/A	

Figure 2 NordicClick's E-Commerce Audit Checklist

Inclusions/Exclusions

Retailers selected from this audit were pulled from the National Retail Federation Top 100.
(Source Link: https://nrf.com/resources/annual-retailer-lists/top-100-retailers/stores-top-retailers-2016)
From that list, we made the following exclusions:

- Amazon
- Retailers no longer in existence
- Grocery Store Chains*

- Drug Stores*
- Restaurants*
- Wireless Carriers*

Companies falling under those noted above are basically their own separate animals when it comes to how e-commerce needs to be conducted, so we excluded them.

Rank	Company	2015 Retail Sales (000)	expand all
1	Wal-Mart Stores	$353,108,000	+
2	The Kroger Co.	$103,878,000	+
3	Costco	$83,545,000	+
4	The Home Depot	$79,297,000	+

Figure 3 National Retail Federation Top 100 for 2016

Desktop and Mobile Web Browsers Only

Though some of the retailers have Native Mobile Apps, we focused on browser based shopping.

Timing

The study reflects data from Q3 of 2017 (when the study was conducted) and should be considered a benchmark of data that was current as of August, 2017.

Audit

The checklist used covered 75 items across nine categories.

The Retailer List

In cases where a "Top Retailer" is a parent company with several brands under its umbrella, we chose one brand out of multiple to audit.

The audit list contained bonafide retailers only, as opposed to brands that sell directly. *(For example, Nike.com is not part of this study even though they have a large e-commerce business. A "Top Brands E-Commerce Audit" is the subject of a future study.)*

Given the exclusions noted above, this should not be considered an audit of "The Top 50 Retailers." It's an audit of "50 OF THE Top Retailers." Note the clear difference. Below is the list of retailers audited:

BIG BOX / DISCOUNT	HOME IMPROVEMENT / AUOT PARTS	APPAREL / FASHION / DEPARTMENT STORE	SPECIALTY STORE
Walmart	Home Depot	Macy's	Game Stop
Costco	Lowe's	TJX (TJ Maxx audited)	Signet Jewelers (Kay Jewelers audited)
Bed, Bath and Beyond	Menards	Kohl's	
	AutoZone	Nordstrom	Williams Sonoma
Target	O'Reilly Auto Parts	Ross Stores	Michael's Stores
BJ's Wholesale	Sherwin Williams	JC Penney	Ulta Beauty
Best Buy	True Value	Gap	
Dollar General	Advance Auto Parts	L Brands (Victoria Secret audited)	
Dollar Tree		Dick's Sporting Goods	
Staples		Ascena Retail Group (Maurice's audited)	
QVC		Foot Locker	
Toys 'R Us		Burlington Coat Factory	
Office Depot		Academy Sports Outdoors	
IKEA North America		Saks Fifth Avenue	
Tractor Supply		Neiman Marcus	
Big Lots		H & M	
Petco		Sears Holdings (Sears.com audited)	
PetSmart			

BENCHMARK STUDY:
THE NUMBERS

PRE-CHECKOUT:
OVERALL GLOBAL SITE EXPERIENCE

This category covers "the overall site experience" prior to the checkout. We address specific things like the product (or category) listing and product detail pages later in more detail, so this section focuses on elements that would be present on the overall site.

1. THE "INTRUSIVE" POP-UP

An "intrusive" pop-up is one that displays itself immediately upon landing on a website. It ALWAYS prompts you for some type of action (take a survey, enter your email address, etc.). Sometimes they will offer something of immediate value in exchange for customer information, but too often, nothing special. Examples include some of the following:
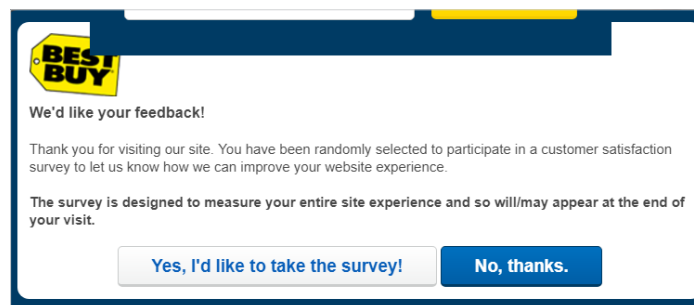
Figure 4 Survey prompt from Bestbuy.com
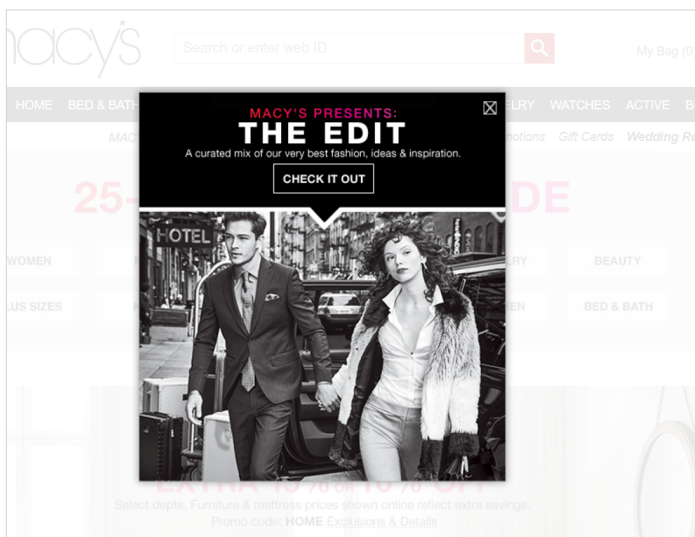
Figure 5 Pop-up from Macys.com

Perhaps "The Edit" means something to loyal Macy's customers who are familiar with the brand, but to a first-time visitor, the pop-up offers nothing of real value in exchange for the intrusion (granted, it isn't asking for any personal information).

EDITORIAL COMMENT
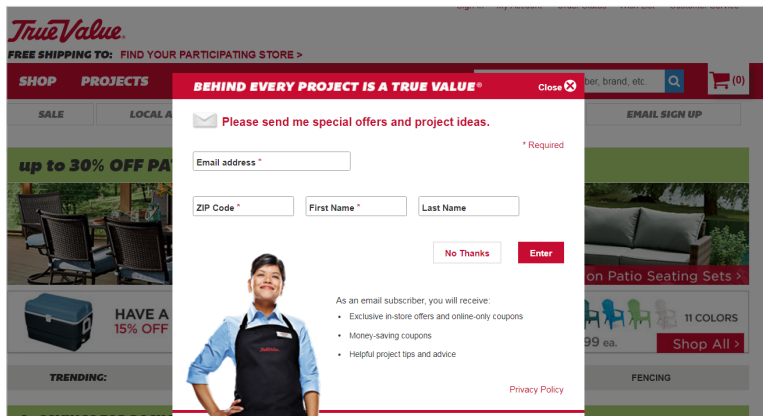
Figure 6 Pop-up on TrueValue.com
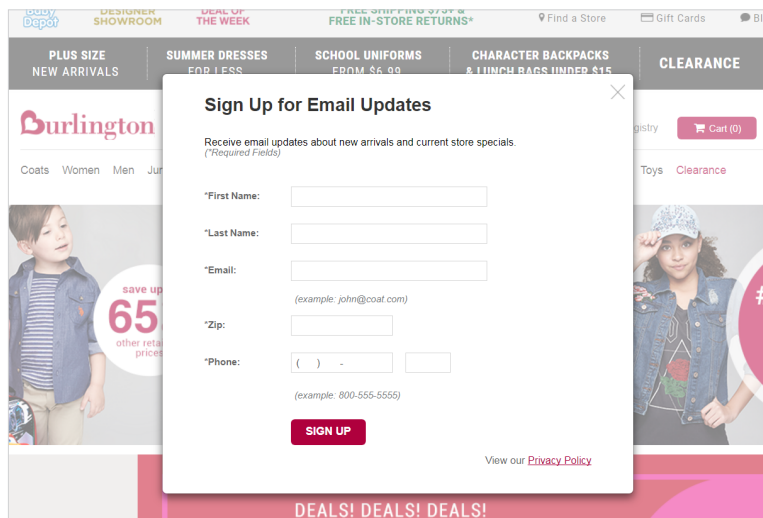
Figure 7 Pop-up on BurlingtonCoatFactory.com

> The biggest challenge with these two pop-ups is that they don't subscribe to the "Equitable Exchange of Information" principle which states that "for giving up something of value (personal information), a site visitor must receive compensation that is equitable."

EDITORIAL COMMENT
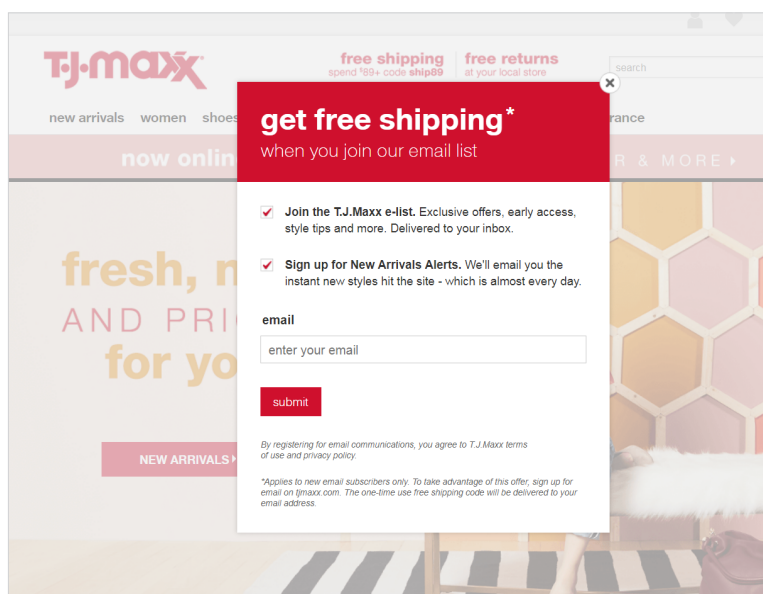
Figure 8 Home page pop-up on TJMaxx.com

> This is an example of an "Equitable Exchange of Information." It could be argued that "free shipping" is an expectation in today's E-Commerce world, but that isn't the point. This customer is being asked for personal information and given something that has a tangible (and measureable) value.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

36%
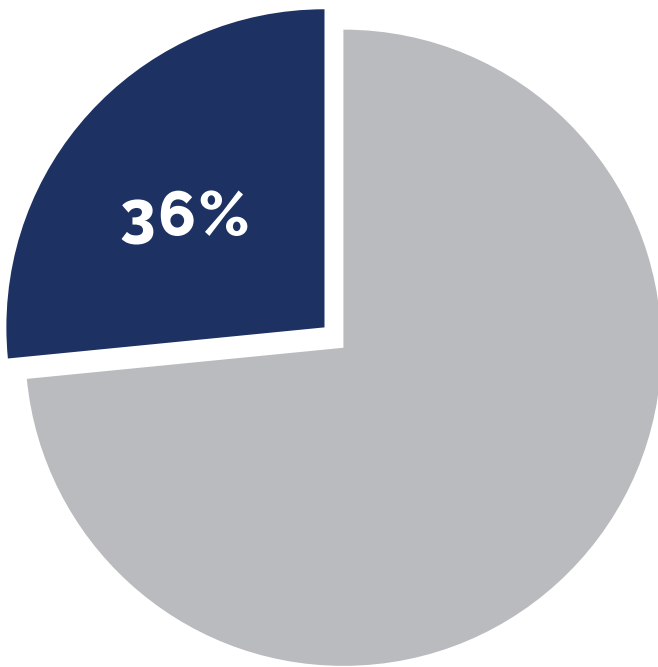
18

out of 50 Retailers audited used the "Intrusive Pop-Up"

2. DOES THE SITE HAVE SITE SEARCH FUNCTIONALITY?

It's no secret that having Search functionality on an e-commerce store is vital for its success.
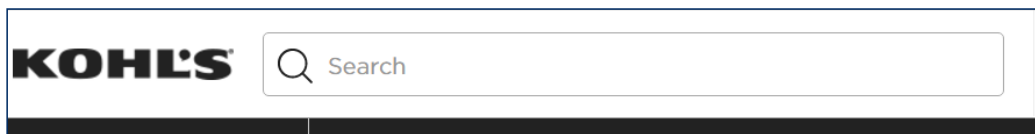
Figure 9 Site Search on kohls.com
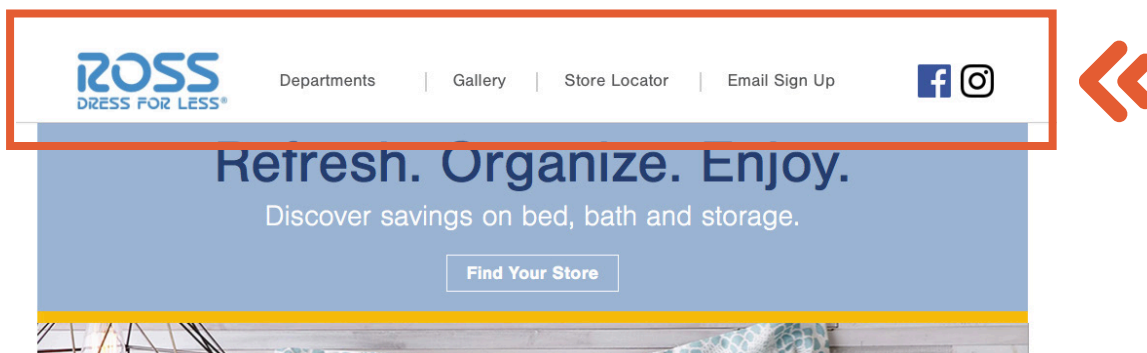
Figure 10 No site search on rossstores.com

AUDIT RESULTS
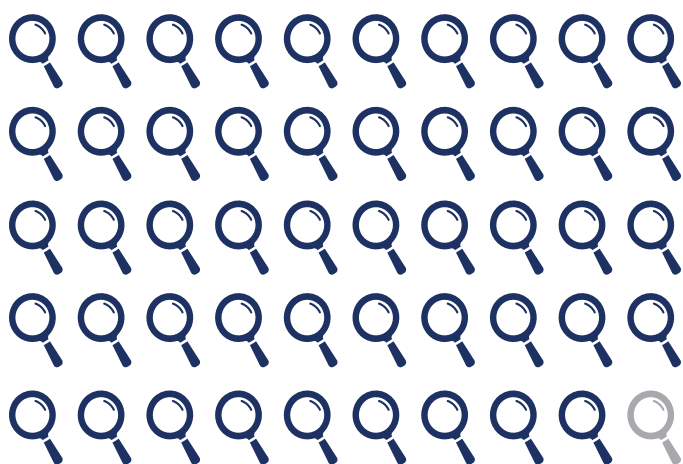
49

out of 50 Retailers audited had Site Search functionality present

The only one that did not (Ross Stores) also does not have an e-commerce offering.

3. SITE SEARCH SUGGESTIONS

Since Google provides site search suggestions, users have come to expect a similar experience when searching on other websites:
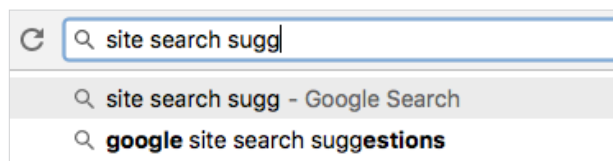
Figure 11 Source: Google.com

Retailers that follow a similar practice are at a considerable advantage in enabling customers to find what they're looking for.
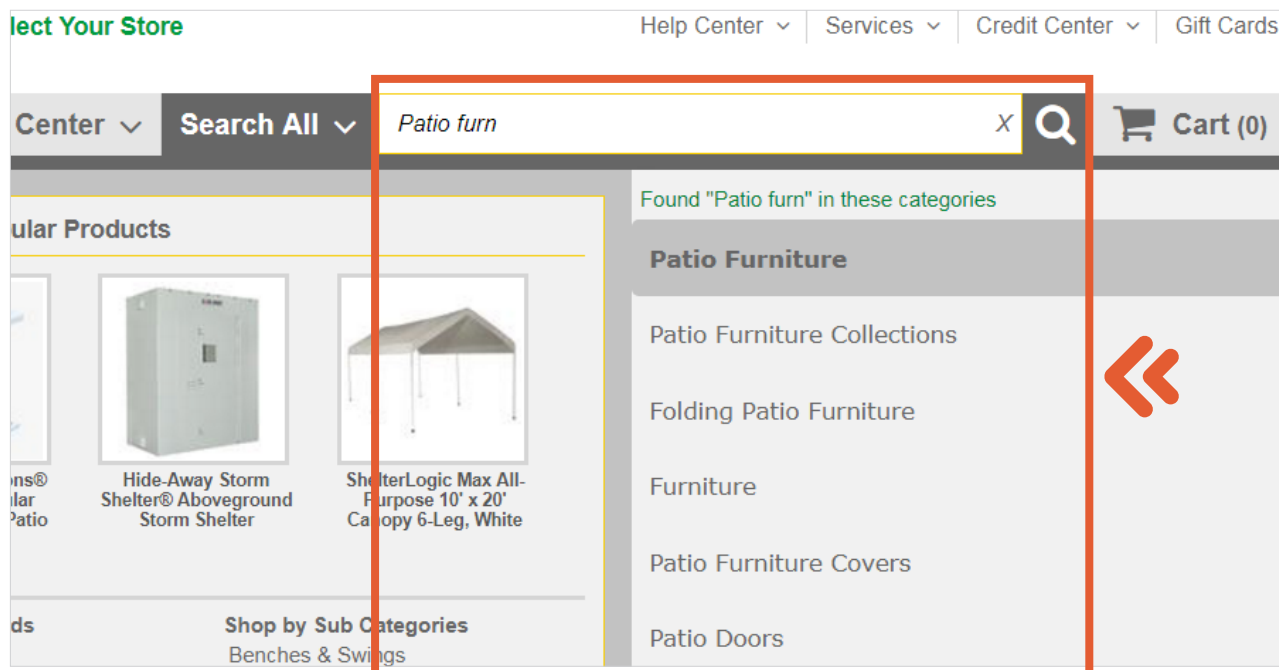
Figure 11 Site search suggestions on Menards.com

AUDIT RESULTS

80%

40
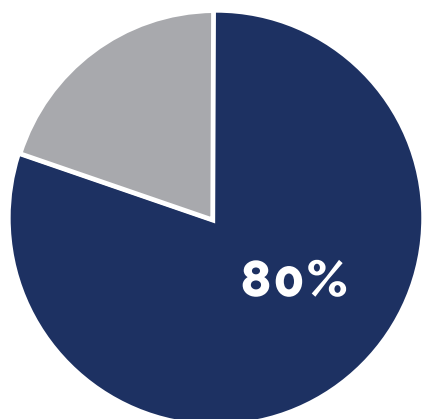
out of 50 Retailers audited had Site Search Suggestion functionality

4. IS THE SHOPPING CART / BAG ICON CLEARLY DISPLAYED AND DOES IT UPDATE AS ITEMS ARE ADDED?

(Ideally on a desktop experience the contents will show on a "mouse hover" vs. requiring a click.)
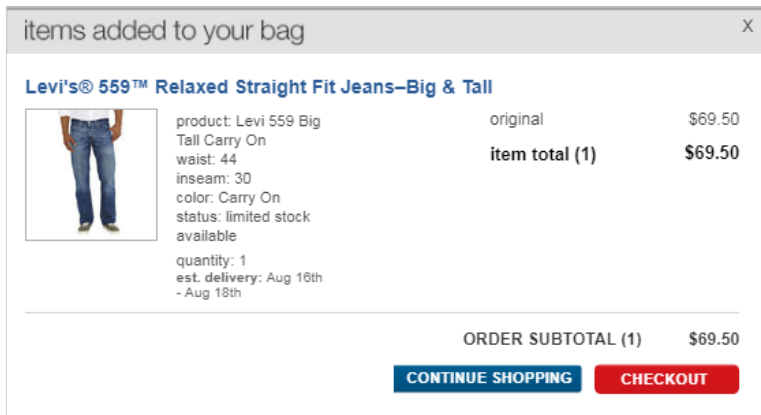
Figure 13 Bag notification
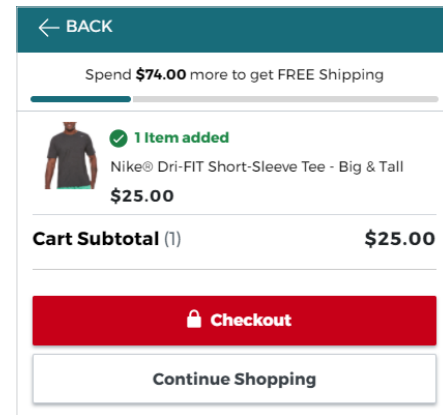
Figure 14 Cart notification

AUDIT RESULTS

Is the Shopping Cart:

1 CLEARLY displayed?

2 Does it update as items are added?

34 Yes AND Yes

7 No AND No

5 No AND Yes

3 Yes AND No

1 Not Applicable

5. DOES THE RETAILER SHOW RELEVANT CROSS SELLS DISPLAYED THROUGHOUT THE PURCHASE PROCESS?

For this project, we took great pains to be objective since we only had access to public facing e-commerce sites. Admittedly, this category is borderline subjective, but to mitigate that possibility, we focused on one key word in that question: relevant.

A cross-sell by definition is complementary to the product being sold. In other words, it's asking the shopper, "Do you want fries with that?" In this audit, we found many different attempts at some form of cross sell, but the end result was somewhat disappointing and indicates room for improvement for retailers willing to take on the challenge.

Are Cross Sells Relevant?
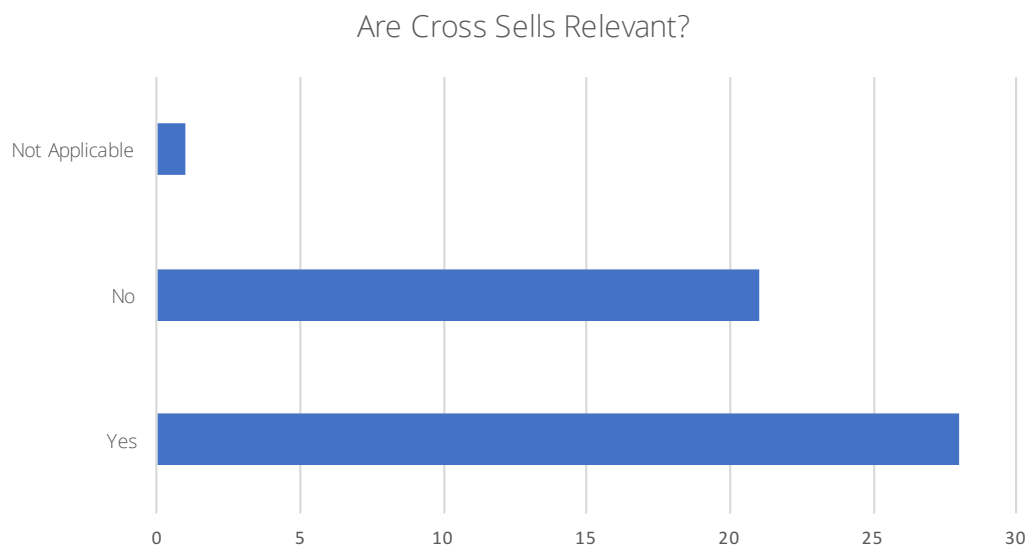
Figure 15 Audit Results

We encountered some of the following verbiage for presenting cross sells:

- People also viewed

- Customers also bought

- Check out these items

- Also featured

The label alone doesn't make something a "relevant cross sell". In the study, we saw these various forms. In some cases, they passed muster. In other cases, not so much.

A few examples are as follows:
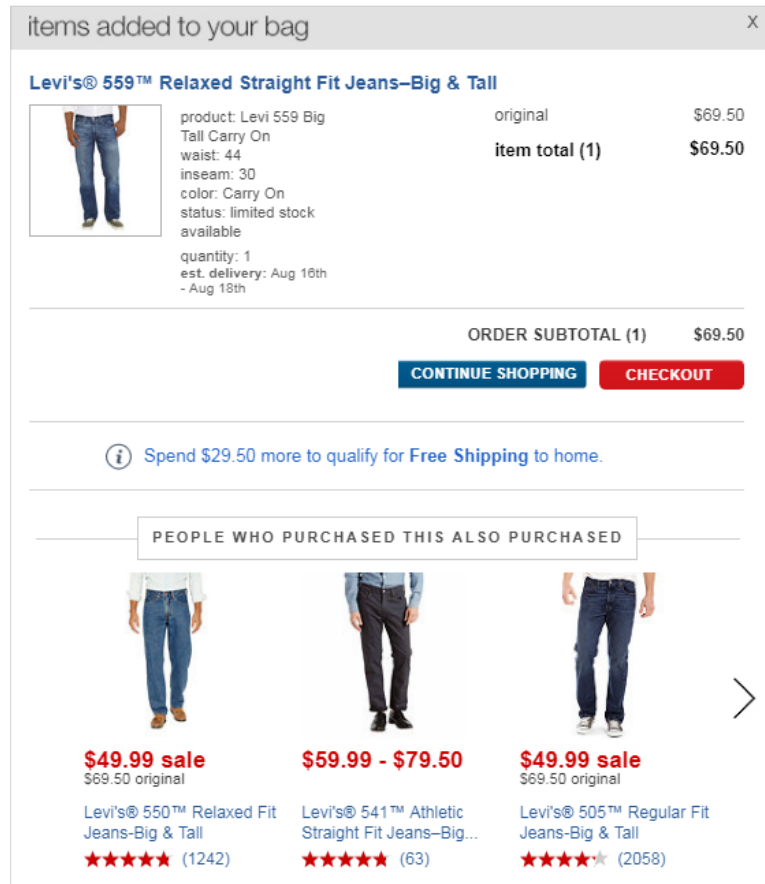
Figure 16 Shopping Bag from jcpenney.com
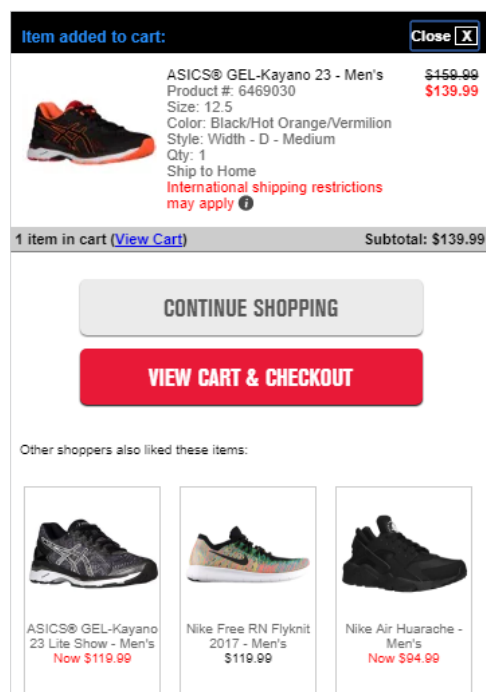
Figure 17 Shopping Cart from Footlocker.com

The customer is being presented with some alternatives to what has been added to the bag, but this is not a cross sell.

None of the options below "complement" the product on the page.

Note that the display on the shoes below actually tries to get a customer to spend LESS.

Keep in mind, this is all being presented after a product has been added to the cart. Instead of presenting something complementary, the retailer is making the customer second guess their decision.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

SO, WHAT DOES WORK? Well, once in the checkout at Foot Locker, the items presented look relevant to the item being purchased. All of the items shown below would fit with the purchase of a pair of running shoes.
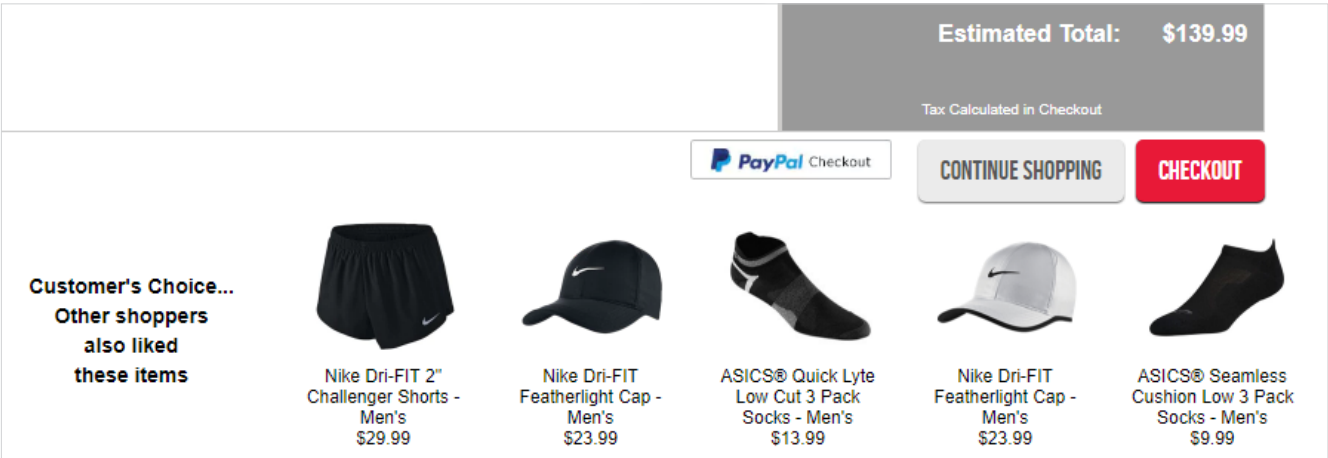
Figure 18 Relevant cross sells in the cart from Footlocker.com

Here is another example of something that works. The item placed in the cart was a plain women's tee shirt and the image to the right represents what one retailer showed:
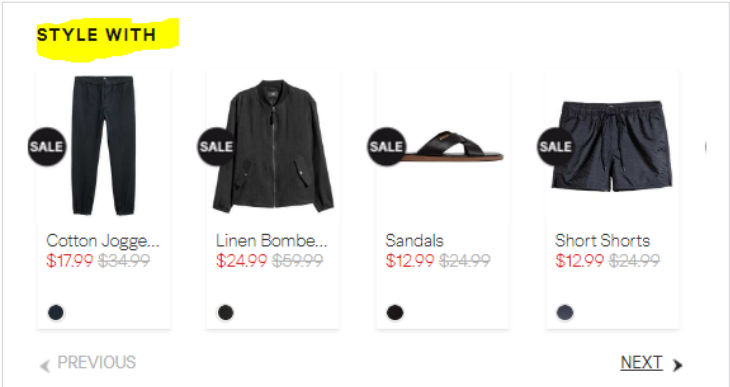
Figure 19 Screengrab for relevant cross sells

Another example. In this case a pair of denim jeans were selected for purchase:
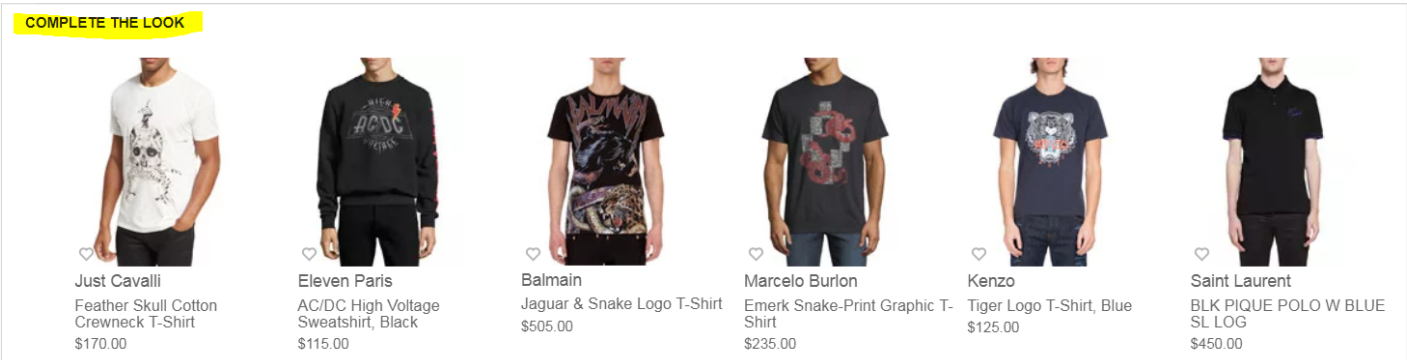
Figure 20 Screengrab for relevant cross sells

6. PAGE SPEED

Google has made no secret that it places significant value on Page Speed. The most important consideration, however, is for the end user. Think about your own experience online. The last thing that you'll tolerate is a slow loading site. Google even provides a Page Speed Insights Tool you can use to test your site.

Note that the score is out of 100. Below are the results from the retailers that were audited as part of this study (scored out of 100):

DESKTOP: 58.78

MOBILE: 51.76

<65 Poor
65-84 Needs Work
85+ Good
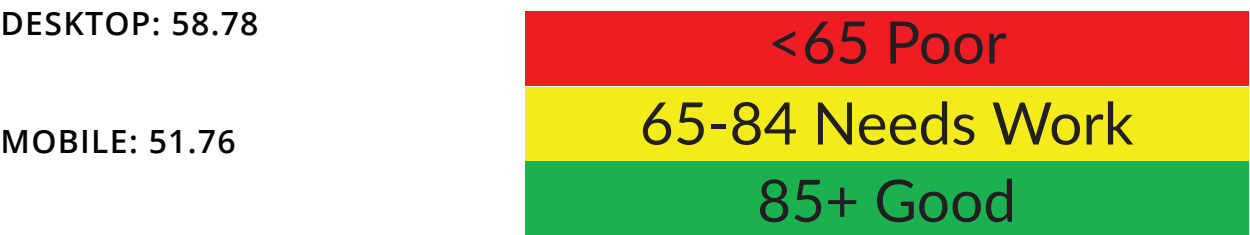
Figure 21 Average page speed score for the audited sites

7. OTHER GLOBAL SITE EXPERIENCE ELEMENTS

The table below illustrates how the retailers we audited performed in other key areas concerning overall site experience:

CHECKLIST ITEM	YES	NO	N/A
Are links to FAQs, shipping details, return/cancel policy, privacy policy prominently displayed?	42	7	1
Are markdowns shown in "Was/Now" (or similar) format so that users can clearly see savings?	44	4	2
Are "Shop/Buy/Add to Cart" buttons used correctly?	46	3	1
Are security/trust seals displayed prominently?	11	38	1
Are payment option icons displayed in an obvious place so that users see them BEFORE adding their first product to the cart?	2	47	1
Are persistent cookies enabled so that returning users don't have to re-add items?	47	1	2
Are users able to set up inventory notification alerts?	3	47	0
If the site features a live chat feature, is it consistently available during business hours/high traffic times?	17	26	7

MOBILE SPECIFIC EXPERIENCE

1. GOOGLE'S MOBILE FRIENDLY TEST

In a "mobile first" world, you obviously need your e-commerce operation to be up to the task. Google offers a very simple "Mobile Friendly Test" you can run to determine whether they feel your site is up to par.
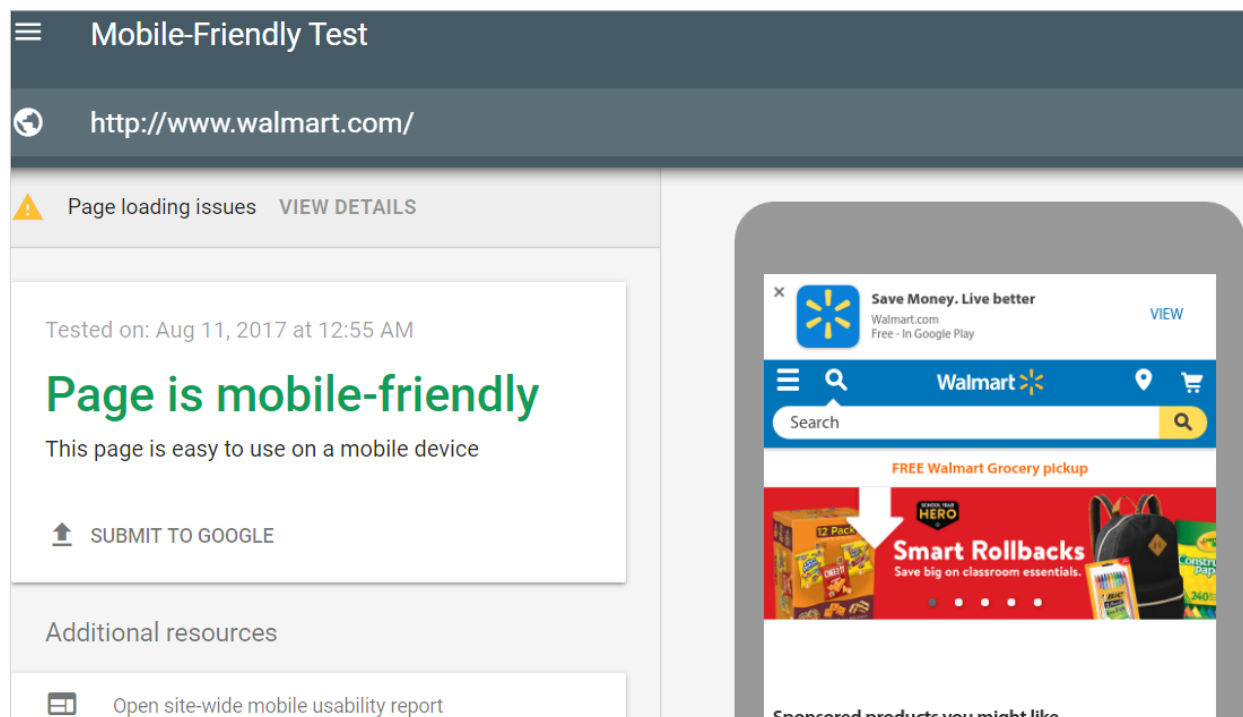
Figure 22 Source: Google

We ran all fifty retailers through this test and they passed.

Note that a) it is a "Pass/Fail" assessment, and b) passing does NOT mean that the site is "mobile optimized." Google is essentially measuring whether or not a mobile browser is likely to render all the elements properly for a handheld device.

2. FONT SIZE AND CONTRAST ON MOBILE
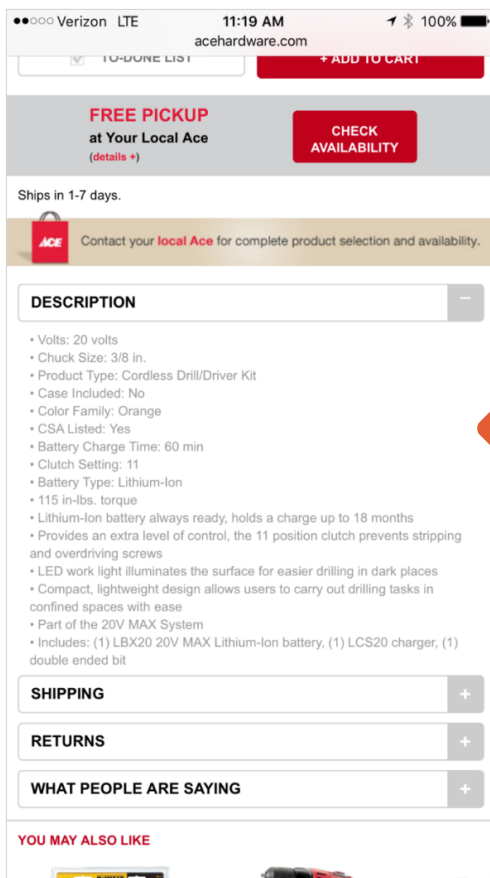
Figure 23 Source: AceHardware.com

NOTE THE DIFFERENCE IN CONTRAST BETWEEN THE TWO FIGURES.

LEFT:

White background

Gray font

No separation

Difficult to read

RIGHT:

White background

Black font

Separation

Easy to read
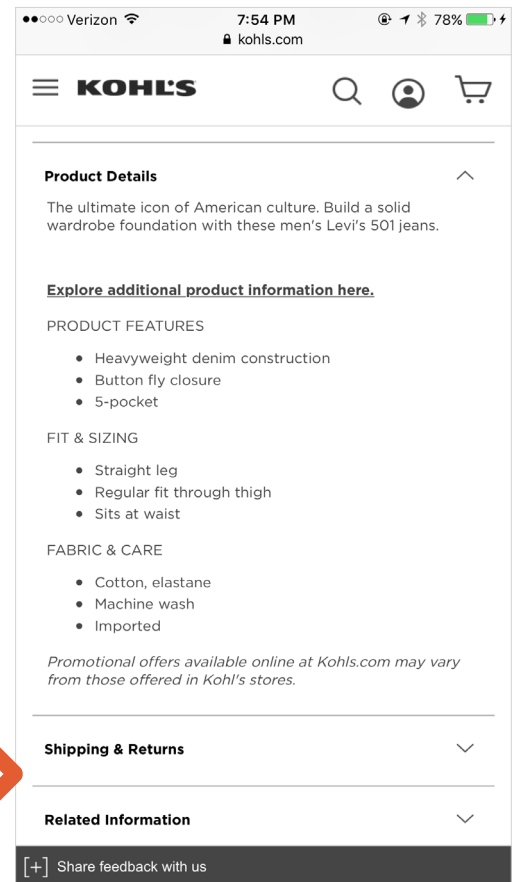
Figure 24 Source: Kohls.com

AUDIT RESULTS

90%
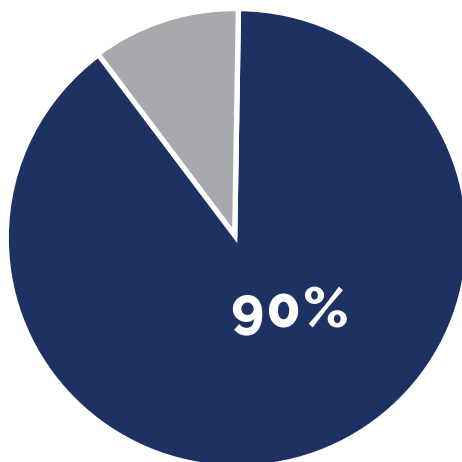
45

out of 50 top retailers audited scored a passing grade

3. ARE LINKS TO FAQS, SHIPPING DETAILS, RETURN/ CANCEL POLICY, PRIVACY POLICY PROMINENTLY DISPLAYED ON A MOBILE DEVICE?

Figures 25 & 26 Source: Homedepot.com
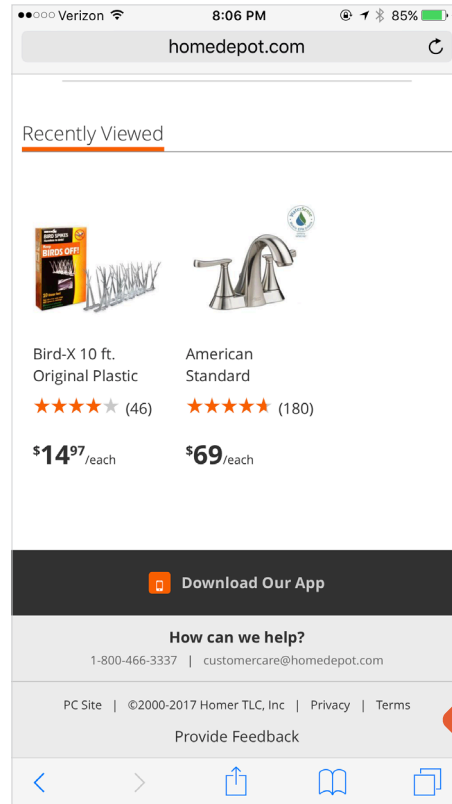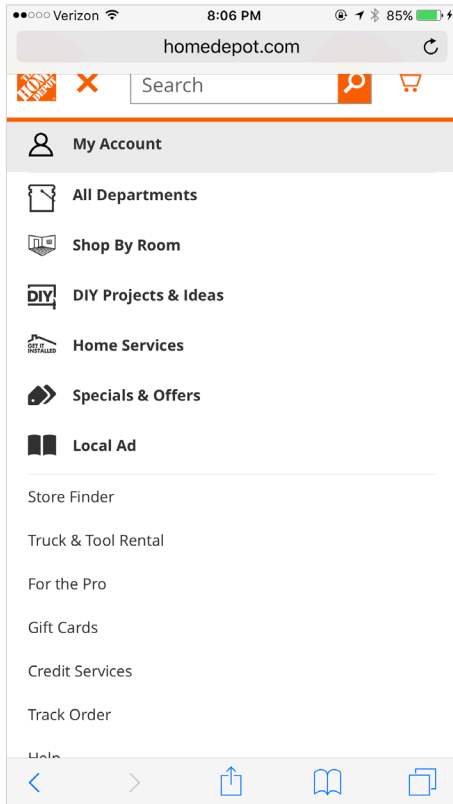
HOME DEPOT IS MERELY 1 OUT OF 30 RETAILERS AUDITED THAT DID NOT HAVE COMPLETE CLEAR LINKS TO THIS KEY INFORMATION THAT CUSTOMERS INVARIABLY WANT.

LIKE MOST, THEY HAD SOME (SMALL "PRIVACY" LINK IN THE FOOTER & "TRACK ORDER" LINK IN THE MENU.

HOWEVER, ALL MUST BE PRESENT TO QUALIFY AS A "YES" IN THIS AUDIT.

AUDIT RESULTS

40%

20

out of 50 Retailers audited passed

4. OTHER MOBILE SPECIFIC STATISTICS

Below are some other mobile specific categories we audited.

CATEGORY	YES	NO	N/A
Are images and other page resources loading & rendering properly?	48	2	
Is the use of unnecessary plugins avoided to maintain a mobile friendly experience?	48	2	
Are tap targets sized appropriately and aligned accurately?	45	5	2
Is the shopping cart icon CLEARLY displayed and does it update as items are added?	38	10	
Are "Shop/Buy/Add to Cart" buttons used correctly?	41	9	
Are users able to save their cart/bag or add contents to a wish list?	33	17	
Is click-to-call functionality available?	37	13	
Is the use of Flash-based content avoided since most mobile browsers do not render Flash-based content?	50	0	
Is viewport properly configured to control the page's width and scaling on different devices?	50	0	
Are clickable/touch elements (links and buttons) far enough apart?	45	5	

No E-Commerce present on two of the 50 retailers audited.

PRODUCT / LISTING PAGE

Besides the site search results, the product listing page is the place where your visitors see what their options are, compare, and decide whether to take the next step and give something a closer look.

Getting this part right is the equivalent of having a properly merchandised department within a store.
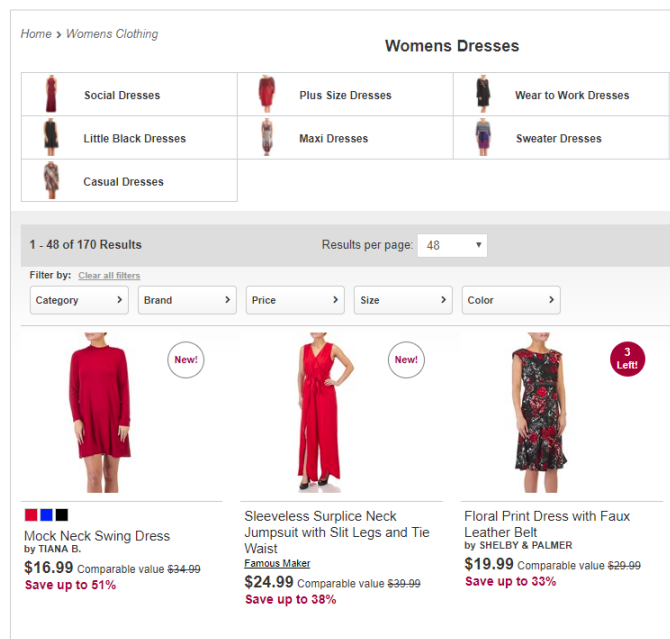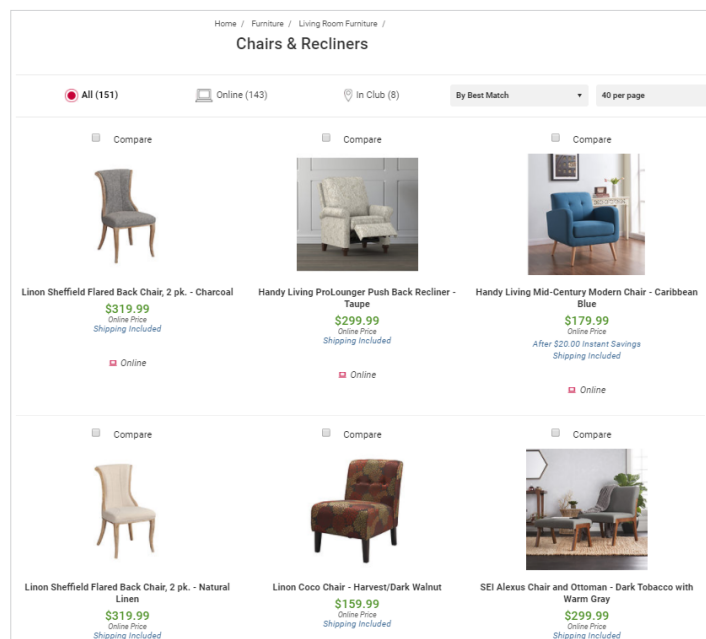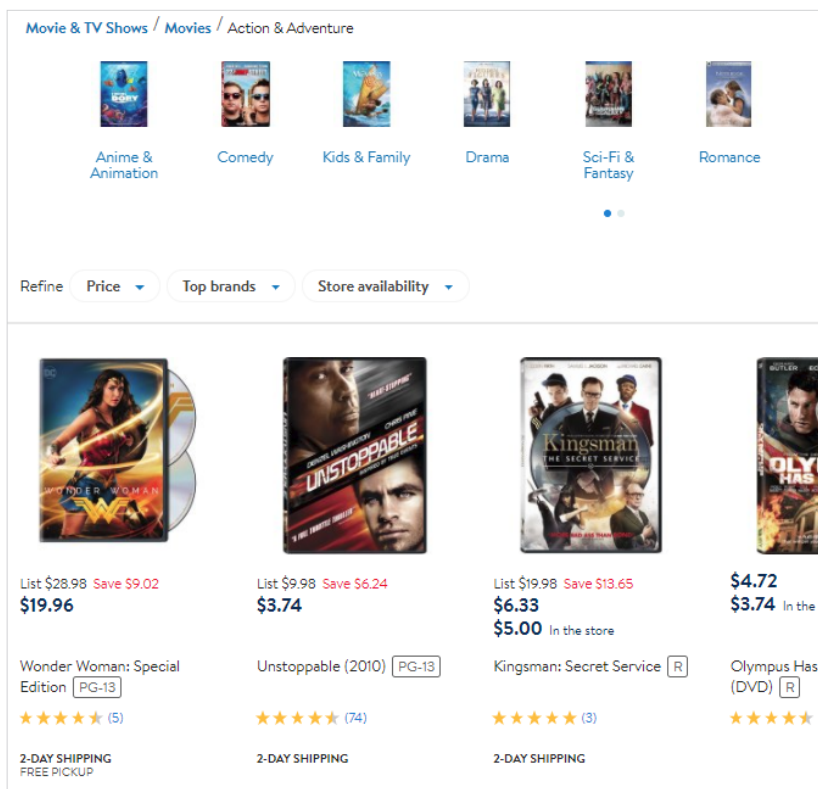
Figures 27-29 Examples of various product listing pages

1. IS THE SORT FUNCTION SET TO "TOP SELLERS" OR SOMETHING SIMILAR?

Of course, this isn't the only valid default setting. In our experience, we have found it tends to work the best for many retailers simply because (whether we as humans admit it or not), we like to follow the crowd and do what's popular.
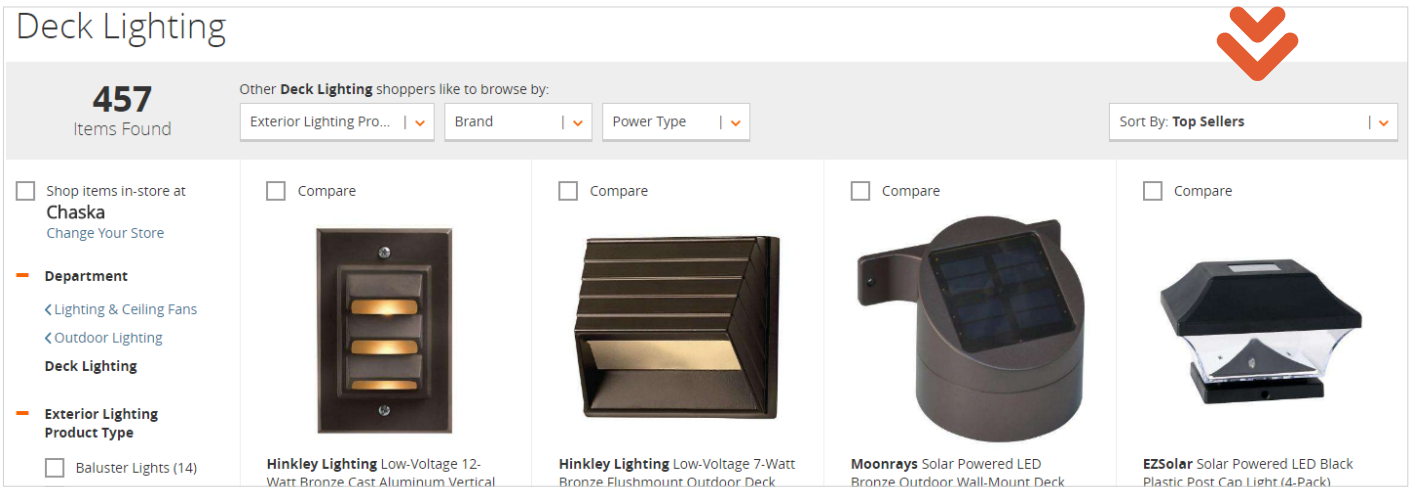
Figure 30 Source: HomeDepot.com

AUDIT RESULTS

42%

21
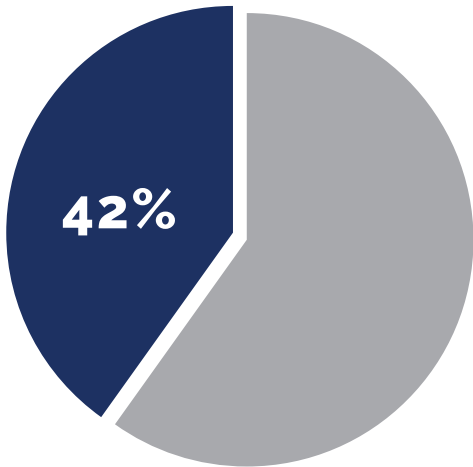
out of 50 Retailers audited had the default settings at "Top Sellers"

Other popular sorting formats that we've seen work well are "Highest Rating" (you must have a robust review program for that to work), "Relevance," and "Best Match." It is smart for retailers to include other options like "Name" and "Price" as a dropdown option, but we do not recommend making those the default options.

THERE ARE A FEW OPTIONS THAT WE DO NOT RECOMMEND:

- **"Featured"** – Think about it. What does this actually mean to the consumer? Also, does the "Featured" aspect ever get updated?

- **"Newest"** – While this one isn't necessarily bad (especially in clothing), a retailer needs to exercise caution. Just because something is "New", does not automatically mean it should get placement above something that is a proven seller.

- **"Price: Low to High"** – Show the customer the low-priced items and you'll sell low priced items.
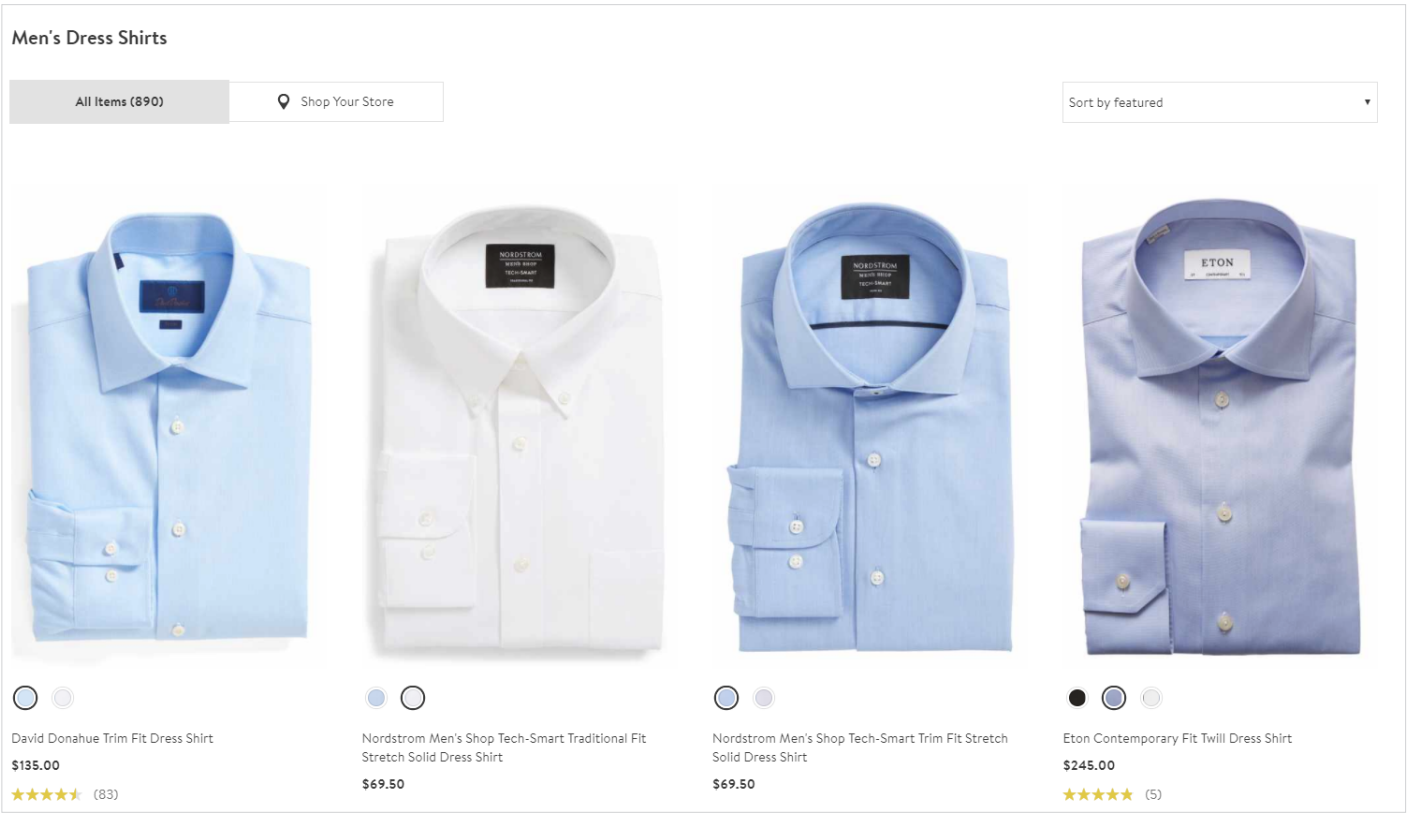
Figure 31 Example of a default product listing of "Featured"

2. ARE THERE "FILTER OPTIONS" THAT MAKE SENSE TO THE USER?

Example:

Figure 32 Filter options on Kohls.com
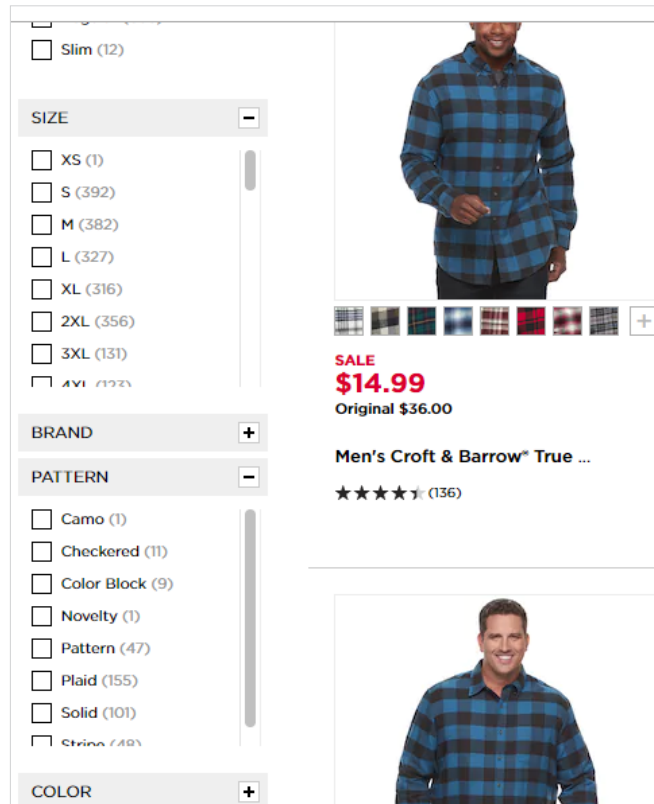
NOTE HOW THE FILTERS PRESENTED HERE ARE PERFECTLY TAILORED FOR A SHIRT. A USER CAN USE AS MANY OR AS FEW FILTERS AS NECESSARY AND AS LONG AS THE PRODUCT ATTRIBUTES ARE PROPERLY CONFIGURED, DESIRED RESULTS WILL BE RETURNED.

STRONG FILTERS ARE AN ABSOLUTE NECESSITY WHEN PRESENTED WITH A CATEGORY THAT RETURNS THOUSANDS OF RESULTS.

On large catalog sites, it can be argued that filters are almost more important than search. Successful e-commerce sites allow their customers to filter 4,000 products down to four relevant choices based on individual inputs.

The smartest e-commerce site managers pay close attention to the data they can glean from this filtering. It's clearly a direct reflection of consumer demand and the subsequent conversion rate is a scorecard of how effectively that demand is met.

AUDIT RESULTS

16 out of 50 Retailers had filtering options

3. ON THE PRODUCT LISTING PAGES, IS PRICING DISPLAYED IN SOME TYPE OF A "WAS/NOW" FORMAT THAT CLEARLY ILLUSTRATES THE REGULAR AND SALES PRICE?
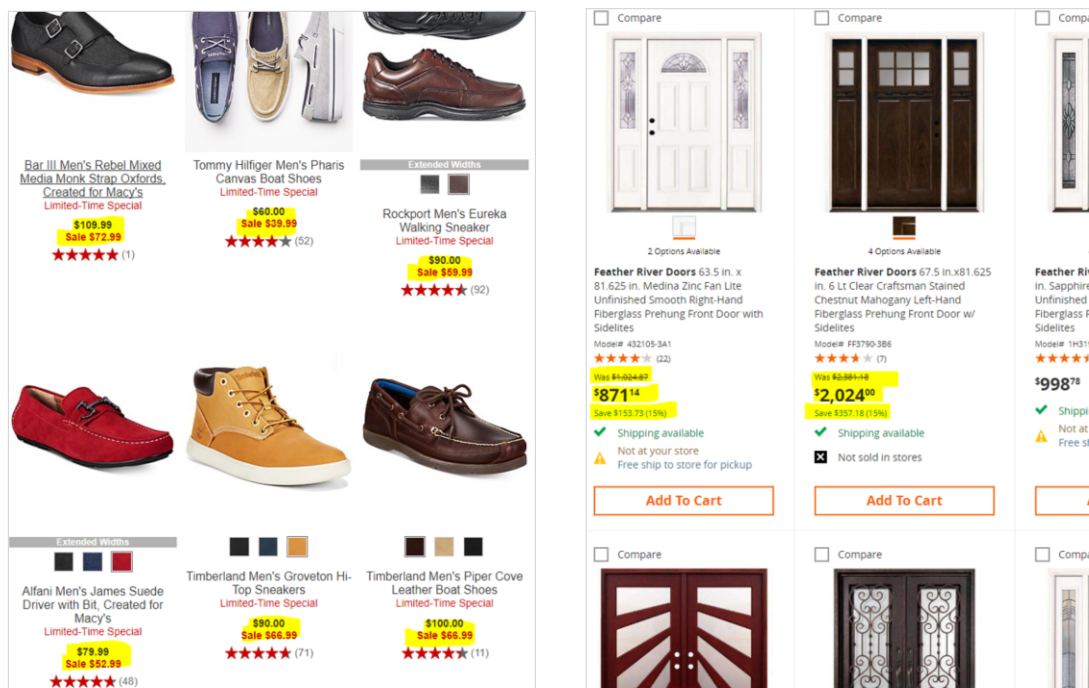
Figures 33 & 34 Examples of pricing displays

ABOVE: Macy's and Home Depot both pass this part, although Home Depot provides even more detail showing customers exactly what it is they're saving. (As a rule, make the customer think as little as possible and save them from trying to do calculations in their head.)

AUDIT RESULTS

86%
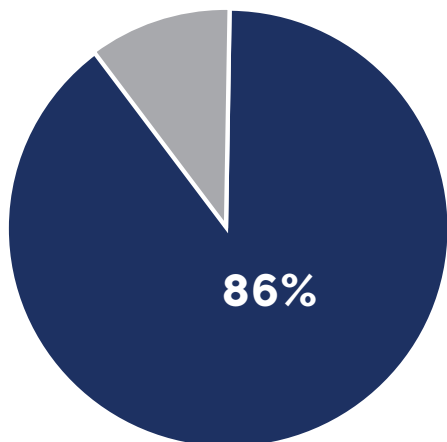
43 out of 50 Retailers audited use Was/Now pricing

ADDITIONALLY:

- Two retailers do not have e-commerce so in a way it doesn't apply, but in another way, it does since they certainly want to drive foot traffic into the store.

- One of the retailers has a flat price ($1 for everything) so it's not applicable.

- Another retailer uses a "Buy one, get one" (BOGO) philosophy.

4. ARE SIDE BY SIDE COMPARISONS AVAILABLE FROM THE PRODUCT LISTING PAGE?

When overwhelmed by options, consumers need every tool at their disposal to decide which product is best. Whether picking out a new car or choosing between dresses, comparison tools are key.

So if you want to improve online customer experience (and close more sales), a side-by-side comparison feature is a must.

EXAMPLES OF SIDE BY SIDE "COMPARISON" OPTIONS
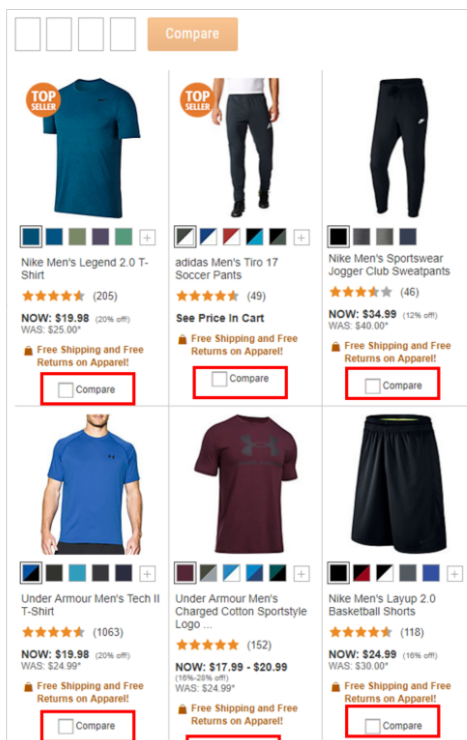
Figures 35 Dick's Sporting Goods (apparel)
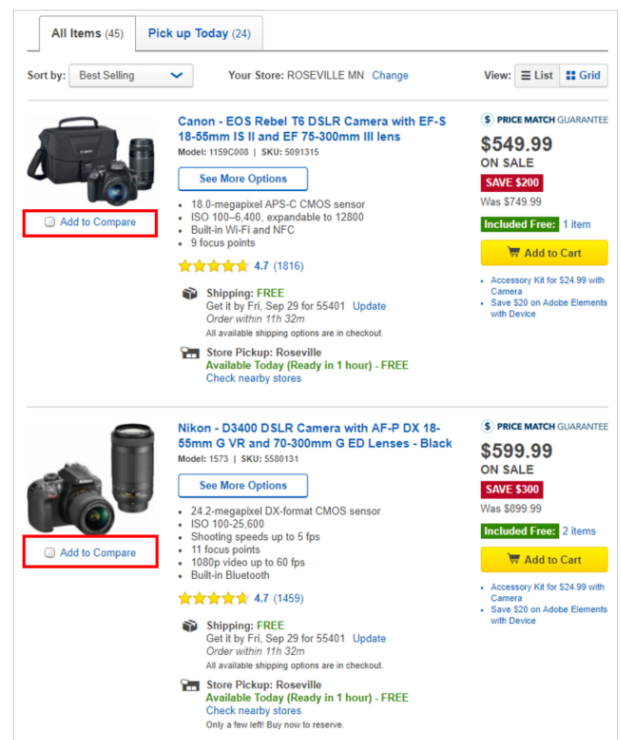
Figures 36 Best Buy (Consumer Electronics)

AUDIT RESULTS

SURPRISINGLY (AND DISAPPOINTINGLY), ONLY

16 out of 50 Retailers audited offered side by side comparison capabilities

PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE (PDP)

1. IS "SHIPS WITHIN XX DAYS" OR "GET BY XX DATE" MESSAGING CLEARLY DISPLAYED?

Product availability AND delivery times are both critical pieces that determine whether a customer moves forward. Below are two examples (Home Depot, left; Target, right) that illustrate a clear industry best practice.
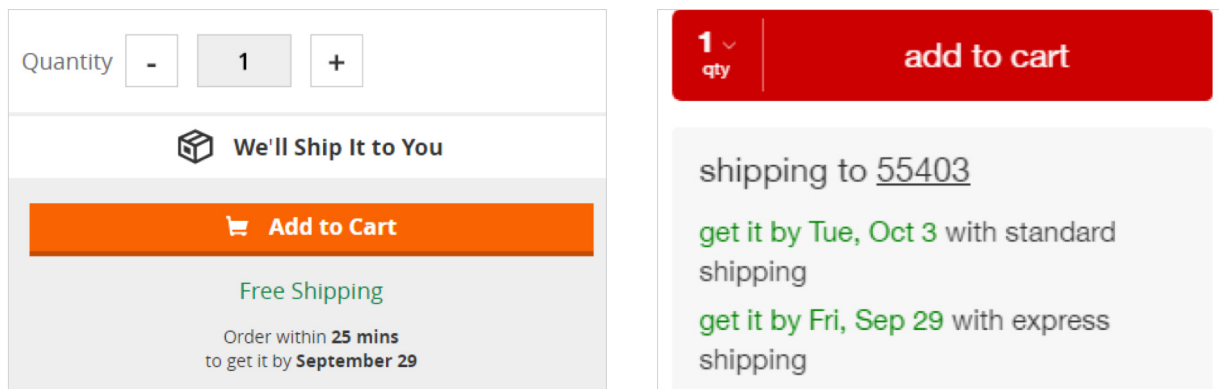
Figures 37 & 38 Examples of properly setting delivery expectations

Getting this piece right is all about logistics, integrations, and e-commerce platform capabilities. Sadly, most of the 50 retailers did not have the level of sophistication needed to achieve and maintain that critical leg up.

Below is one example. Note how the system is sophisticated enough to let the shopper know there are only two items left. Where it falls short is when it stops with "In Stock. Ready to ship" - failing to commit to a delivery or shipping timeframe.
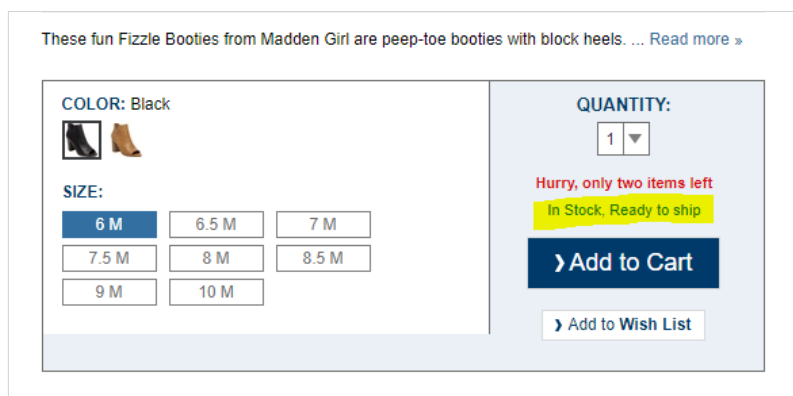
Figure 39 Example of an incomplete delivery expectation

Figure 40 Example of a shipping timeframe that BARELY qualifies as a yes. That's how low the bar is set.

ANOTHER EXAMPLE (LEFT) SETS THE EXPECTATION FOR SHIPPING (BUT NOT DELIVERY).

HOWEVER, IF A CUSTOMER IS IN A RUSH OR NEEDS TO BE ASSURED OF A DELIVERY DATE, THIS IS NOT THE PLACE TO LOOK. THE SHIPPING IS ALSO HORRIBLY EXPENSIVE.

Figure 41 Example of a shipping timeframe that BARELY qualifies as a yes. That's how low the bar is set.

THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF A SHIPPING/ DELIVERY TIMEFRAME PROMISE THAT DOESN'T GO QUITE AS FAR AS THE ULTIMATE BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLE, BUT STILL FITS THE BILL. CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS ARE CLEARLY SET WITH 3-5 BUSINESS DAYS.
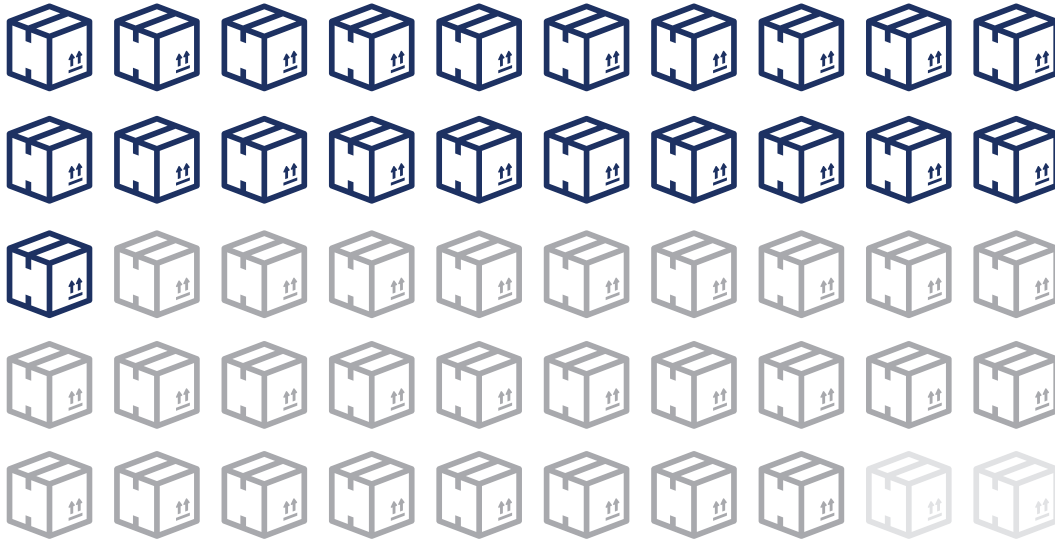
21 out of 50 Retailers audited communicated shipping or timeframes

2. ARE REVIEWS PRESENT AND EASY TO FIND?

To pass, reviews must be both present and easy to find. Most of the "no's" didn't have reviews at all.
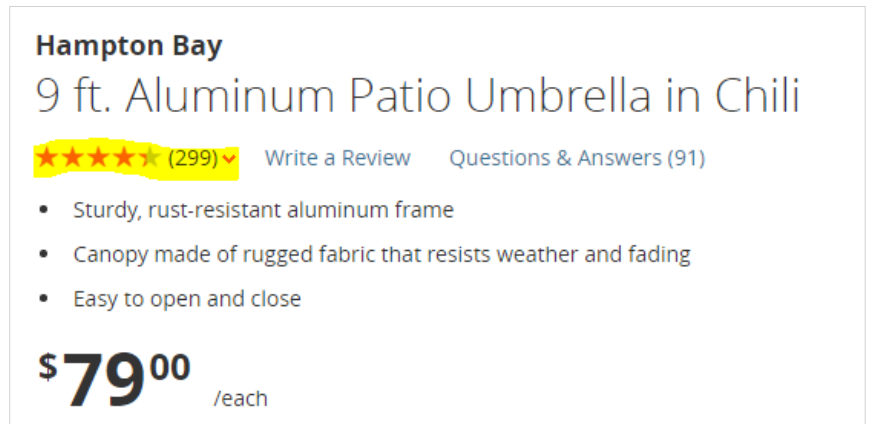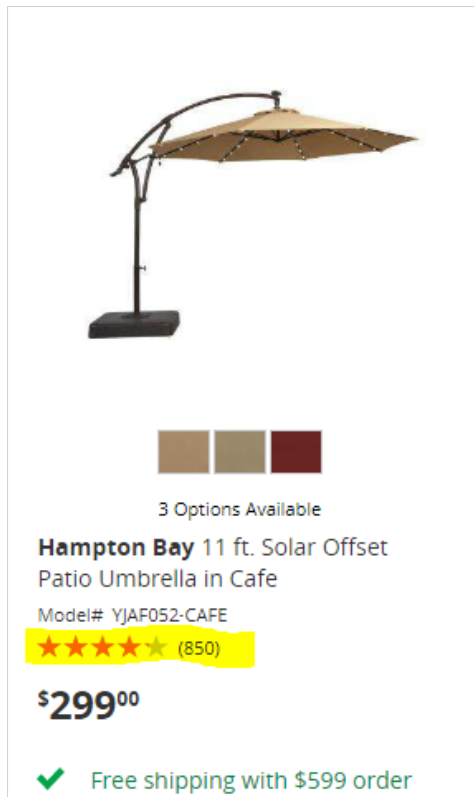
Figures 42 & 43 Examples of easy to find reviews

AUDIT RESULTS

42
out of 50 Retailers audited
1) HAD reviews, and were
2) EASY to find

3. IS A QUESTION & ANSWER (Q & A) SOLUTION PRESENT?

We've long contended that a well-executed Q & A is just as important as reviews (if not more). This is especially true for products with complicated assembly, installation, use cases, etc.
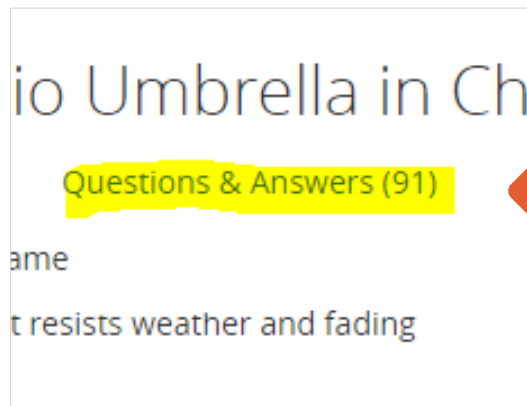
Home Depot is a prime example. Its Q & A program serves three ultimate purposes:

1. It adds real value to the potential customer exploring options.

2. The retailer gets to learn what questions, concerns, issues, and hesitations actual customers have.

3. It's an avenue for purchasers to "stay engaged" after the purchase. There is almost never a downside to that.

Figure 44 Example of Q & A
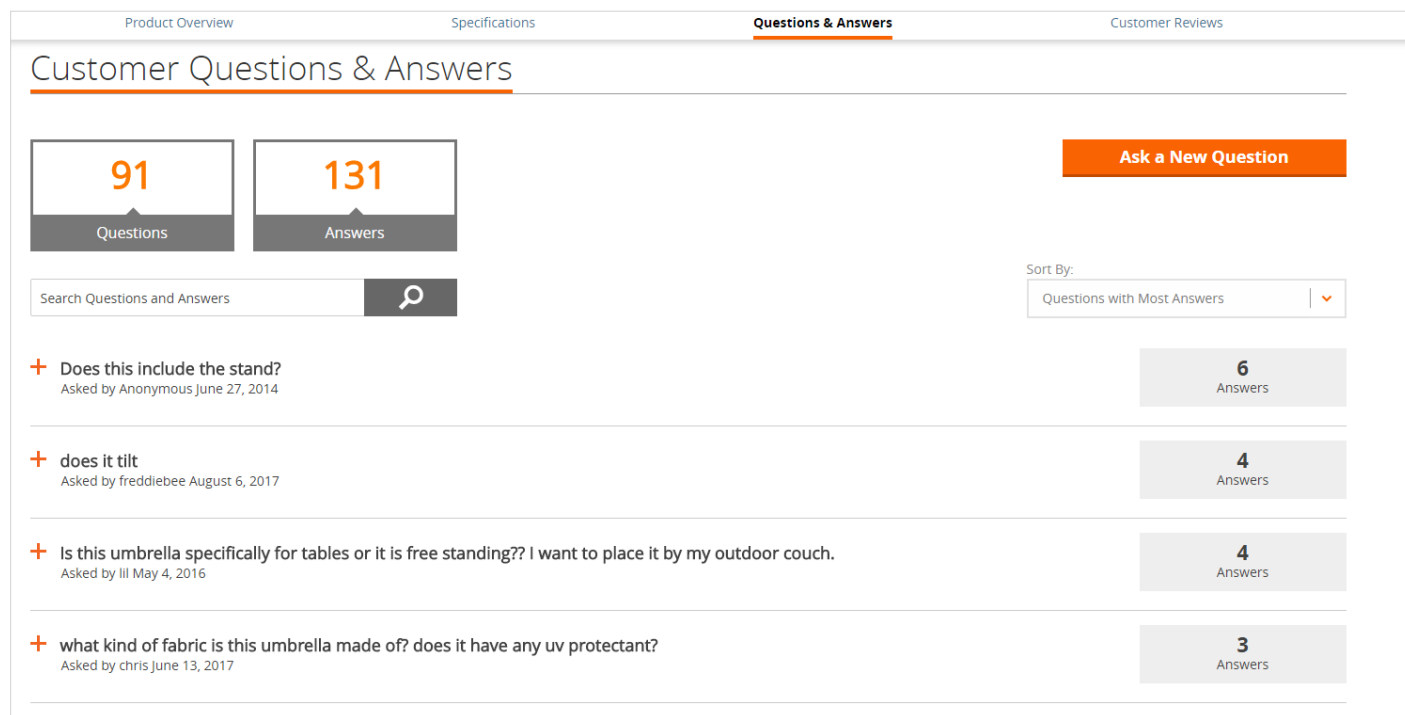
Figure 45 Example of Q & A for one specific product

Whatever you're selling, Q & As provide major opportunities to gain a competitive advantage. If a customer needs to wear, hang, assemble, clean, power, do anything with a product, a Q & A section is worthwhile.

Below is an example of its use in apparel. JC Penney has it in place and even the Q & A for a simple pair of Levi's Jeans for women has significant activity.

Figure 46 Example of Q & A for clothing

AUDIT RESULTS

Q & A PRESENT? SADLY, ONLY

16 out of 50 Retailers audited had any sort of Q & A present for shoppers

On the plus side, this presents an opportunity to improve customer experience and gain some real e-commerce traction. We could also assume a Q & A would positively affect brick and mortar sales since many customers research online before walking into a store.

4. ARE MULTIPLE ITEM VIEWS SHOWN? *(For example, both sides, top, back, front, sole, 360 views, video, etc.)*

Selling product via a two-dimensional medium has one very distinct and inherent disadvantage:

You cannot physically interact with it!

- You cannot pick it up to examine closer.
- You cannot "feel the quality."
- You cannot appreciate the "full experience" like you can in a brick and mortar store.

Given these inherent limitations, it's critical that retailers provide images showcasing as many relevant angles and views as possible:

Figure 47 Source: Sak's Fifth Avenue

Figure 48 Source: Lowes

AUDIT RESULTS

80%

40
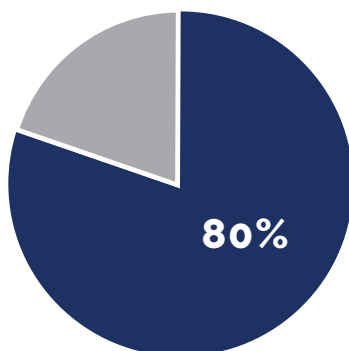
out of 50 Retailers audited provide multiple views of product

There are few exceptions to this best practice so it would be in the best interest of the remaining retailers to take a closer look at this.

5. ARE ALL COLORS OR AVAILABLE OPTIONS DISPLAYED?

On the surface, the success criteria for this would seem obvious, but there are two components required to gain a "yes" for this audit:

- The product detail page must clearly show the available options (color, size, style, scent, etc.)

- When clicking on the option, the product detail image must reflect what the shopper selected.
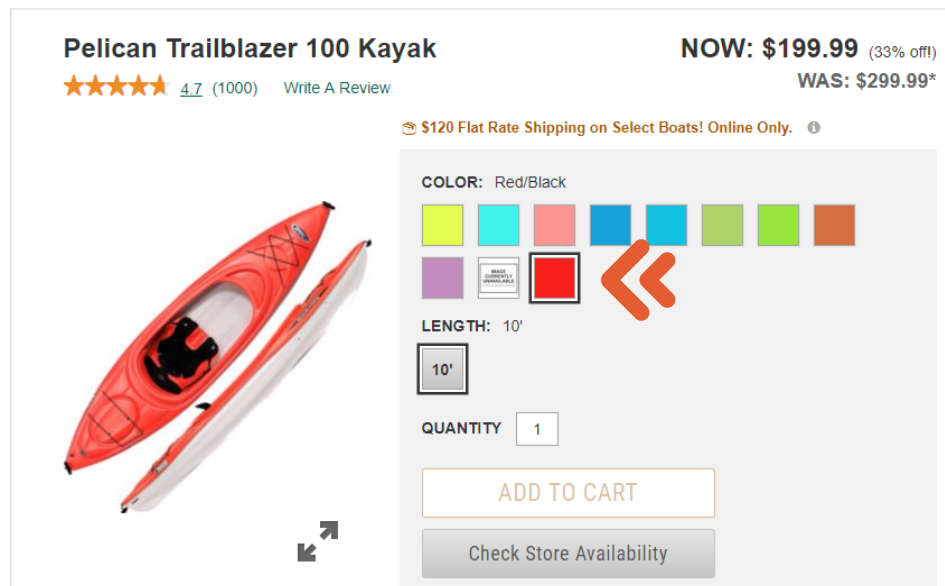
NOTE HOW THE COLOR BOX SELECTED REFLECTS IMAGE A SHOPPER SEES

Figure 49 Example of color selection done right on a product detail page

This functionality doesn't apply to every product (white socks really don't require options), but ALL the retailers measured have plenty of products where it IS appropriate. For example, even a company that sells paint can show the differences between type of coverage (*flat, glossy, semi-gloss, eggshell, etc.*).

AUDIT RESULTS

70%
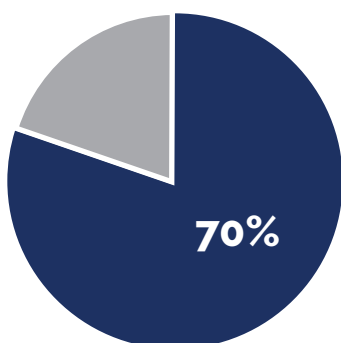
35

out of 50 Retailers audited have the options functionality needed on their site

6. ARE FULL DETAILED SPECIFICATIONS AVAILABLE?

It's obvious that more complicated products like electronics, power tools, cameras, and auto parts benefit from having full detailed specifications available to shoppers on the product detailed page.

DETAILED SPECIFICATIONS FOR A LOG SPLITTER

Figure 50 Example of detailed specifications

DETAILED SPECIFICATIONS FOR A CAMERA

Figure 51 Another example of detailed specifications on a product detail page

What's often lost is that simple products like a watch should also include detailed specs.

Figures 52 & 53 A seemingly "simple" watch and product specifications

PRODUCT SPECIFICATIONS FOR A SIMPLE WATCH (NOT A SMART WATCH OR FITNESS COUNTER DEVICE).

Not EVERY shopper cares enough about product specifications nor would every shopper take the time to read through them. But when your customer is about to pull the trigger, that small differentiating detail in the product specs can make the difference between getting a sale or a page exit.

In 2017, there's no excuse for NOT providing the detail. Product manufacturers are typically more than happy to provide it. If they're not, retailers may want to take that into consideration when determining what to carry and promote.

Even clothing can benefit from having detailed specifications. Think about all the considerations that may go into a decision about whether or not to buy a shirt:

- Cleaning (dry clean, machine wash, hand wash, separately, cold, hang dry, etc.)
- Materials
- Country of origin

- Environmentally friendliness
- Ethical manufacturing
- Wrinkle care
- Flammability
- Etc.

Hopefully by now you're a firm believer that a shopper should have the option to see as much (or as little) information needed to make an educated buying decision. No need to overwhelm and shove the product specifications in the customers face, but make ACCESS to them plain to see and easy to get.

AUDIT RESULTS

33

out of 50 Retailers audited made detailed product specifications available to their shoppers

7. OTHER PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE ELEMENTS

Below are the benchmark results of other best practice audit items from the product detail page. As you can see from the chart, results are decidedly mixed:

PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE	YES	NO	N/A
Can items be backordered and is that specified along with an ETA?	3	47	
Is product copy relevant, concise and benefit-driven?	43	7	
Are bullets used to highlight benefits?	39	11	
Are images clear and high quality?	48	2	
Is the "Item Added" notice prominently displayed when an item is added to cart?	45	3	2
Are cross-sell items CONSISTENTLY relevant to the on-page product?	26	24	
Are related products shown before checkout (e.g. if a remote control is added, are batteries shown as a cross-sell prior to checkout)?	28	22	
Is "Was/Now" sale pricing prominently displayed?	43	7	
Are links on the page kept to minimum so as not to distract from the purchase?	39	9	2
If offered, are gift wrapping, custom messages, or other specialty options clearly displayed?	5	43	2

Here's an example of some poorly optimized product copy:

THIS EXAMPLE USES BULLET POINTS TO ILLUSTRATE "KEY POINTS," BUT THE PROBLEM IS THAT THEY'RE ALL "KEY POINTS." SOME BULLET POINTS COULD BE TURNED INTO GREAT PRODUCT DETAIL COPY, WHILE OTHERS BELONG UNDER SPECIFICATIONS. EITHER WAY, THERE SHOULD AT LEAST BE SOME SORT OF STRUCTURE AND HIERARCHY TO THE DETAILS.

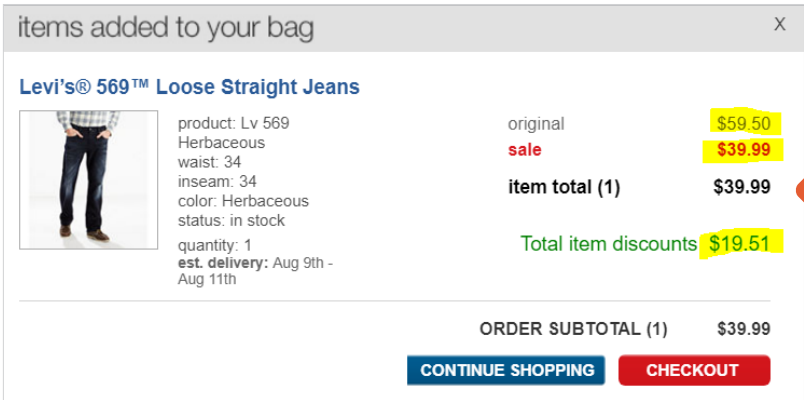Figure 54 Example of poorly written product copy

THE SHOPPING CART / BAG / BASKET

1. IS THE TOTAL AMOUNT SAVED (IN $$) SHOWN PROMINENTLY ALONG WITH THE DISCOUNT PER ITEM?

Another way to word this question is: "Are you making the shopper think too much at a critical point in the purchase process?"

Remember that the shopper has made it to the point of putting a product in a cart. While this doesn't guarantee a purchase, it's obviously a major step towards that end. The last thing you want to do is make them second guess the action they've just taken. Retailers that do that typically get rewarded with a higher than necessary cart abandonment rate.

The image below from a JC Penney shopping bag is an example of a retailer doing this well. It's clear, it's not fancy, and they don't get cute about it. They make it easy to understand.

HERE THE SHOPPER CAN CLEARLY SEE THE:

- ORIGINAL PRICE
- SALE PRICE
- TOTAL IN THE BAG
- SAVINGS
- ORDER SUB TOTAL

Figure 55 Example of a proper way to display discount pricing in a cart/bag

The following are a couple of examples where the experience is not so clean. The first one here is from Nordstrom:
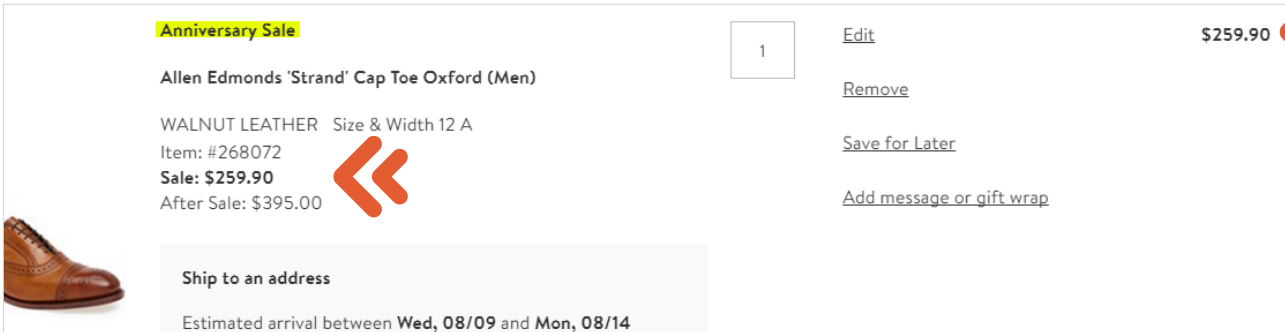

Figure 56 Example of a way to display discount pricing that is not "clean" for the customer. Too much thinking is required.

To a Nordstrom shopper, the term "After Sale" does actually mean something. It basically means the regular price – what it will cost once the sale is done. As a shopper, you know that it's on sale. What you DON'T quickly know is how much you're saving in terms of dollars OR percentage. In doing the math, here's what it amounts to:

- Savings of $135.10 (Dollars)

- Savings of 34.2% off the retail price

The discount is clearly a significant one (anything over 30% is generally compelling). But if the price points don't allow for quick math, you're making the customer think too much. As previously noted, for this audit we did not have access to any analytics or performance metrics. It is quite possible that Nordstrom has tested this method of pricing and determined that it works. We're merely noting our observations based on experience.

Here is another example that shows "savings applied." The shopper does gain the mental reinforcement of seeing the original price along with a clear indication that savings are applied, but it is not clear what was saved.

Figure 57 Example of a way to display discount pricing that is not "clean" for the customer. What are the savings, again?

In our review of how savings are shown in the cart/bag, we found a total of six main methods employed:

- Showing the final only (including any discount)

- Showing the original, then final

- Showing the original, then final after rebate

- Showing the savings, then final

- **Showing the original, final, savings ($$)**
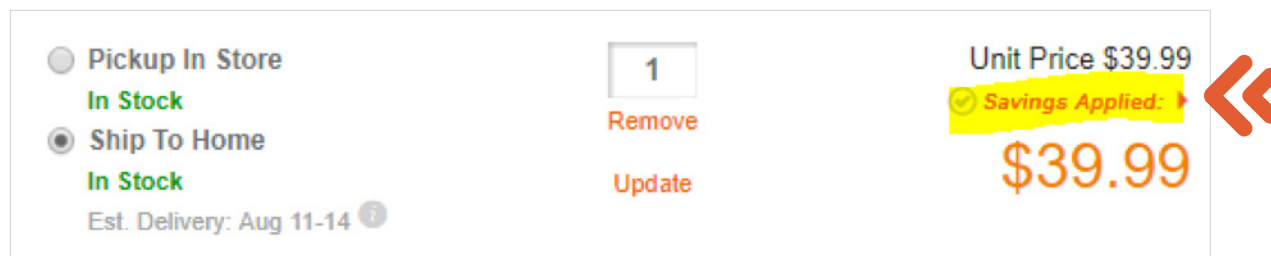
- **Showing the original, final, savings (%)**

BASED ON OUR EXPERIENCE OF AUDITING E-COMMERCE SITES AND LOOKING AT PERFORMANCE METRICS, WE TYPICALLY SEE THE BOTTOM TWO METHODS AS THE BEST PERFORMING IN TERMS OF REVENUE AND CONVERSION RATES.

AUDIT RESULTS

$ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $
$ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $
$ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $
$ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $
$ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $ $

25

out of 50 Retailers audited showed the original, final, and savings in the cart

Note: In two cases, it was not relevant since there was no e-commerce

Recommendation: When it comes to discount pricing, make sure your messaging is crystal clear AND show it to the shopper at six critical points in the process:

- Home, category, or listing page

- Product detail page

- Cart/Bag

- Checkout

- Confirmation page

- Post purchase communication

2. IS STOCK AVAILABILITY MADE CLEAR PRIOR TO THE CHECKOUT PROCESS?

It's never a good idea to "assume that your customers will assume correctly" – especially when it comes to stock availability. There are different methods to employ this tactic. In some cases, a retailer simply includes "In stock" or "Available" verbiage. In other cases, only sizes or colors that are in stock and available will be shown. Sometimes an out of stock item will be noted in some manner.

AUDIT RESULTS

32

out of 50 Retailers audited showed stock availability prior to the checkout process in some manner
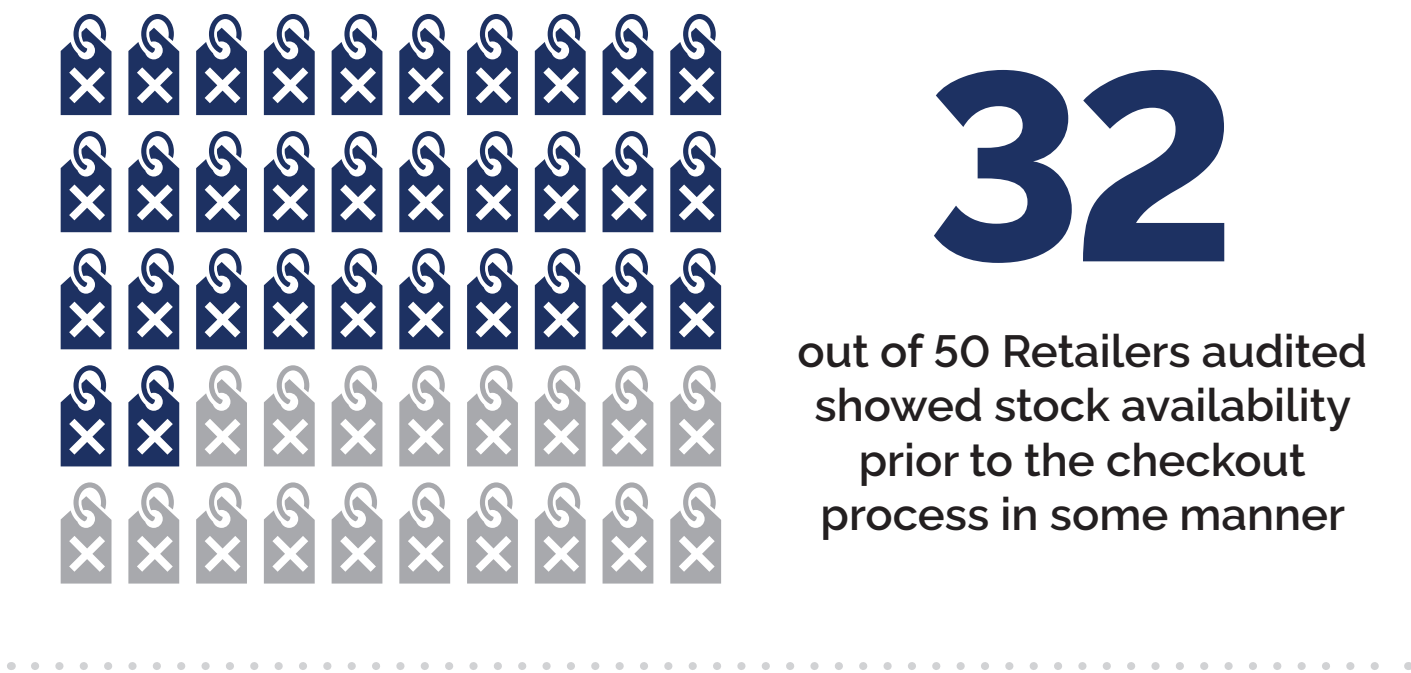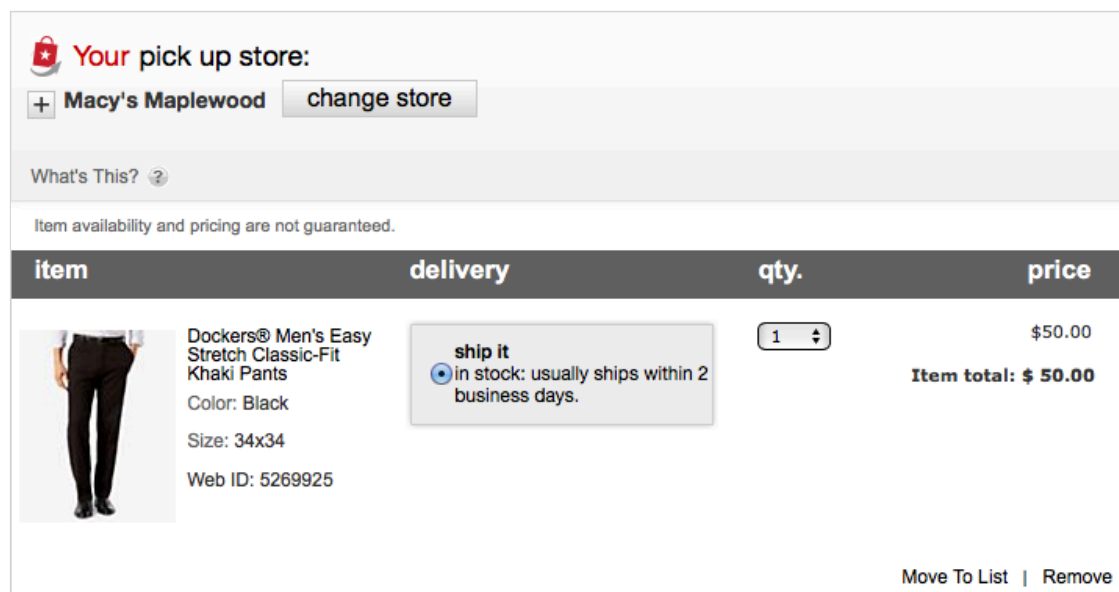
3. ARE CLEAR DELIVERY TIMEFRAMES COMMUNICATED TO THE SHOPPER (PRIOR TO THE ORDER BEING PLACED)?

Although this one is in the Cart/Bag/Basket section of the audit, it can also apply to the product listing, the product detail page, and the checkout page. For retailers that ARE communicating delivery timeframes, we found no one particular place. For purposes of this audit, we allowed a "yes" if the delivery timeframes were clear at ANY time prior to the order being placed. Obviously, the SOONER in the buying process that you can make delivery times clear, the better chance you have of getting that shopper to take the next critical step.

Since we found multiple methods for this, we thought it appropriate to share a few we found so you get an idea of how some top brands accomplish this:

MACY'S BAG (CART): In our opinion, this is adequate and (barely) passes the test. It's not sophisticated enough to provide an exact delivery date (or even a range), but it does clearly indicate the product is in stock and will ship within two business days. Ideally, this would be shown PRIOR to the bag/cart, but it does technically meet the criteria. In a "good, better, best" type of rating, this is "good."

Figure 58 Example that "barely" qualifies as clear shipping communication in the cart/bag

AUTO ZONE PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE: Notice how the page clearly indicates that the product is NOT available for pickup in stores and ONLY available for home delivery. It clearly indicates the product is in stock AND the expected delivery range. It's communicated EARLIER in the process so a shopper is able to make a more informed decision about taking that next step (Add to Cart) if speed of delivery is a consideration (which it often is). In a "good, better, best" type of rating, this is "better."

Figure 59 Example that shoes the stock status and an estimated delivery date

OFFICE DEPOT PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE: Notice how both the delivery price AND the delivery date are clearly communicated. In fact, it is SO clearly communicated that you know exactly how long you have to place the order if you want to get it in the promised timeframe. Formatting issues aside (note how the "2" wraps to the next line after "November"), this is what we would consider "best" on a "good, better, best" scale.
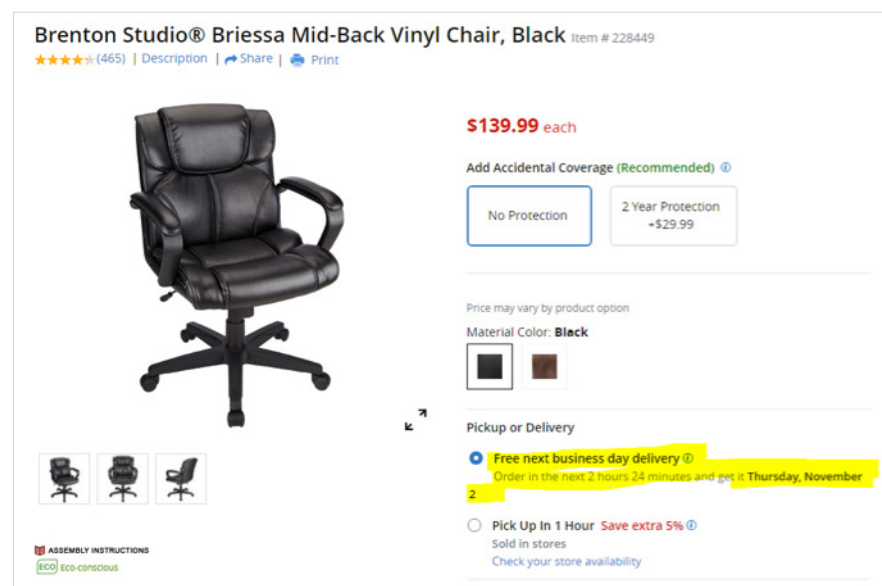
Figure 60 Example shows the delivery timeframe and prompts the customer to take action

17 out of 50 Retailers audited communicated delivery timeframes before checkout

Only 17 out of 50 communicated delivery times clearly and prior to checkout. Sadly, most of the retailers failed at this part of the audit. This feature goes far beyond e-commerce platform functionality. The back-end logistics must be in place as well as an ability for those systems to communicate to the platform in real time. Our advice to retailers on a limited budget trying to optimize their shopping experience is to start somewhere. If you always ship orders within two business days of receipt, at least communicate that so you don't leave shoppers guessing.

4. OTHER SHOPPING CART ELEMENTS

Below are the benchmark results of other best practice audit items for the cart / bag / basket. Most retailers pass the first item noted, but close to half miss the mark on the last two:

SHOPPING CART / BAG / BASKET	YES	NO	N/A
Are "Add/Remove/Quantity" fields easy to edit?	43	5	2
Are "Continue Shopping/Checkout" buttons highly differentiated (e.g. by color)?	23	25	2
Is the final price shown before checkout (including tax and shipping)?	25	23	2

CHECKOUT PROCESS

CHECKOUT PROCESS	YES	NO	N/A
Is there a guest checkout feature (Ideal)	43	5	2
Is single-page checkout used (Ideal)	7	41	2
If not, is a step-by-step visual breadcrumb of the checkout process displayed (limit to three max)	37	4	9
Does checkout take place on a different domain - including subdomain (If so, is tracking code appropriately modified)	7	41	2

CHECKOUT DOMAIN:

If the checkout takes place on a different domain than the main commerce site (such as a sub-domain like "checkout.domain.com"), by itself it's not a bad thing as long as the user experience doesn't suffer. It can, however, throw off your web analytics unless certain steps are taken during the implementation phase (of web analytics). We have seen multiple retailers get the implementation wrong and pollute the data. For any retailer using a different domain for checkout, we recommend a full Web Analytics audit to ensure quality data.

Product Detail Page:
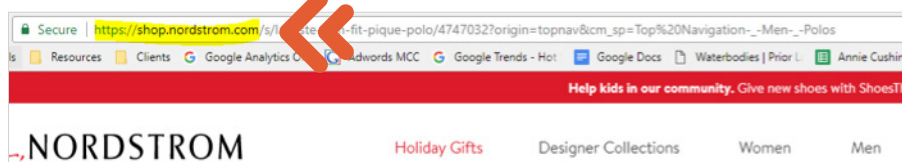
Checkout Page:
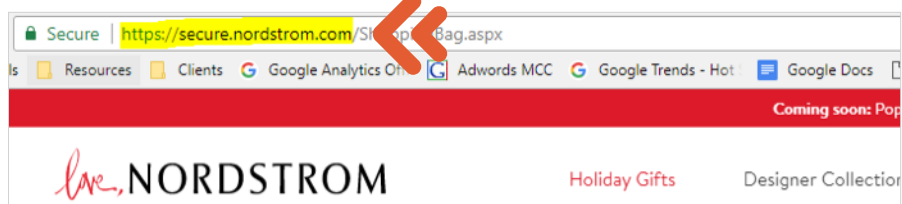
Figures 61 & 62 Examples showing a different sub-domain for the product detail page vs. the bag
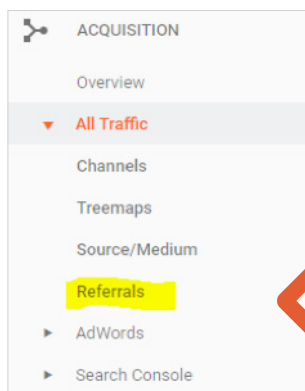
IF YOUR E-COMMERCE SITE USES A SEPARATE DOMAIN (OR SUB-DOMAIN) FOR CHECKOUT, BE SURE TO CHECK YOUR REFERRALS IN YOUR ANALYTICS. IF YOU HAPPEN TO SEE YOUR OWN DOMAIN IN THE REPORT AS A REFERRING SOURCE, THEN YOU HAVE AN ISSUE AND SHOULD GET YOUR ANALYTICS AUDITED.

Figure 63 Screenshot from Google Analytics

SHIPPING SCREEN

SHIPPING SCREEN	YES	NO	N/A
Are multiple shipping options provided with clear price/time details for each	37	11	2
Is there a free and/or lower-cost option	31	17	2
After entering the billing address, is there a "Use this address as my Ship To" notice that then auto populates the shipping address fields?	46	2	2
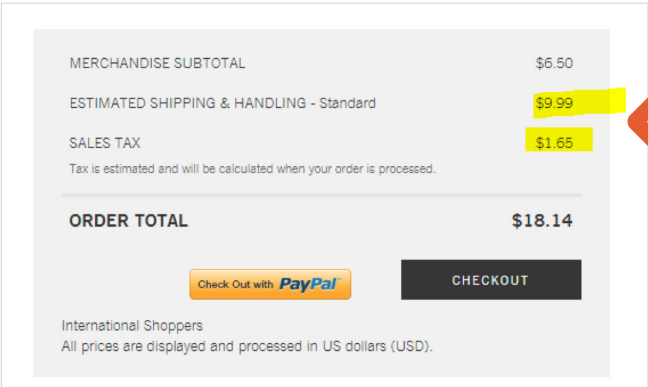
Figure 64 Shipping costs more than the itempage vs. the bag

THERE IS NO FREE (OR LOW COST) SHIPPING OPTION IN THE EXAMPLE TO THE RIGHT. WHEN SHIPPING COSTS MORE THAN THE PRODUCT AND SALES TAX, YOU WON'T SELL A LOT OF PRODUCT.

FOR THIS PARTICULAR SITE, THE SHIPPING COST DOES DECREASE IF YOU CHECK OUT WITH MORE PRODUCTS - BUT THAT POINT IS NOT COMMUNICATED.

SHIPPING IN THE EXAMPLE BELOW IS NOT OUTRAGEOUS, BUT THERE IS NO FREE OR LOW-COST OPTION (OR AT LEAST ONE THAT'S COMMUNICATED).
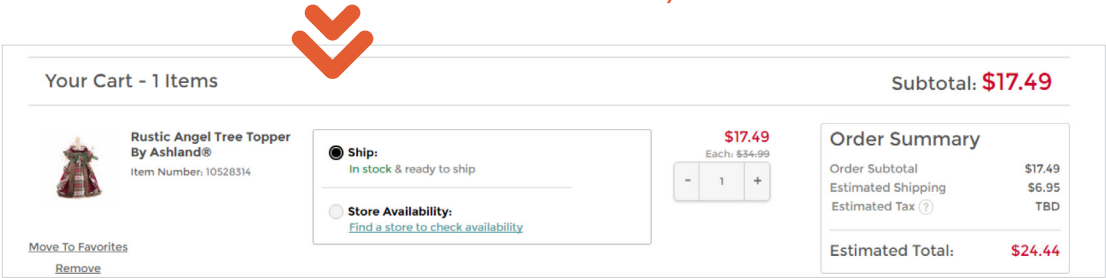
Figure 65 Example of a shopping experience with no shipping options

In an E-Commerce transaction, shipping options can make or break that sale. It's not always about having "Free" or even "Low Cost" shipping. Sometimes it's about urgency or flexible delivery times. In any case, the most important thing a retailer can do is understand their consumers' needs, offer the proper options, and communicate those options clearly.

EDITORIAL COMMENT

PAYMENT SCREEN

This is where things get really serious. Think about it – up to this point, there was no REAL commitment. A shopper browsed, selected, added to a cart, possibly even entered an address. Committing to making a payment makes the whole thing real. This process needs to be seamless for the customer. Some of the items we examine include things that are very basic, but still important.

PAYMENT SCREEN	YES	NO	N/A
Are security/trust seals prominently displayed?	21	27	2
Is there a CLEAR, easy option to navigate back to shopping?	8	40	2
Are multiple payment options provided?	48	0	2
Is case sensitivity turned off for promo codes?	37	1	12
Are users being asked to enter, "CC type"? If so, this is a redundant step that can be eliminated since the credit card number already indicates type - (e.g. 4XXX = Visa, 5XXX = MC, 3XX = Amex, 6XXX = Discover).	16	32	2
If a CC security code is required, are there clear instructions/visuals indicating where to find it by card type (e.g. Amex uses a 4-digit code on the front of the card vs a 3-digit code on back)?	45	3	2

Here are a few examples of trust symbols:
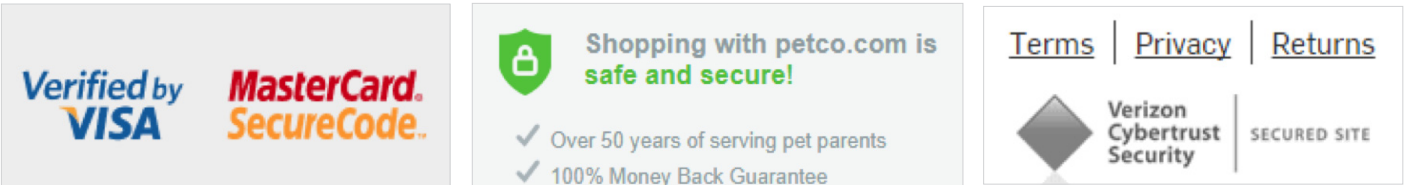
Figures 66 - 68 Examples of "Trust" symbols commonly found on payment pages

BRICK & MORTAR STORE INTEGRATION

This is framed as one simple yes or no question and the bar is set low. The qualifier is simple: "Can an online shopper see if a product is available for purchase AND in stock at a brick and mortar store of their choosing?"

Figure 69 Integration of brick and mortar store and online experiences

This piece is more important than many realize. Customers don't really care about what channel you want to drive them to. They have a need – they want you to fill it. Sometimes it's easier to have a product shipped to the home. Other times a shopper is thinking about something "in the moment" and wants to know if the product is in stock at the store on their way home from work. It makes perfect sense when you think about it.

FOR EXAMPLE, ON EVERY PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE ON THE ACE HARDWARE SITE, YOU WILL FIND:

Figure 70 Example of integration in action.

Menards shows its integration efforts on the product detail page and in the cart. Based on the product availability, you'll be able to select your preference for getting the product.

Figure 71 Integration of brick and mortar store and online experiences

AUDIT RESULTS

30

out of 50 Retailers audited had their online experience integrated with the brick and mortar

HEADSCRATCHING MOMENTS

HEADSCRATCHING MOMENTS

On more than one occasion when conducting these audits, our team had to wonder:

- "What were they thinking"
- "Did anyone actually think that through?"
- "How in the world does this actually help the customer?"
- "Uh, wow!"
- "Who approved THAT?"

Here are nine of those moments - and may we all learn from them!

1. THE "ADD TO CART" INTERRUPTION

SCENARIO

Upon clicking "Add to Cart", we were immediately presented with a Voice of Customer (VoC) survey pop up.
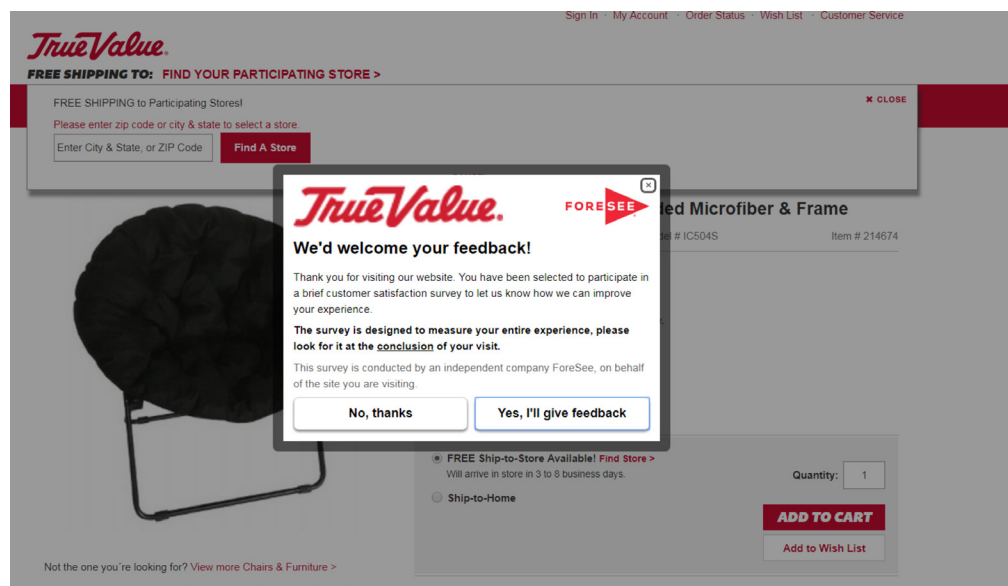
Figure 72 Survey Pop Up upon adding a product to the cart

HEADSCRATCHER
These types of interruptions happen frequently, but it always seems like it's at the wrong time. Seriously, why now?

2. THIS PRODUCT IS AVAILABLE, RIGHT?

SCENARIO

The product detail page below shows the coffee table is available online and ready for delivery:
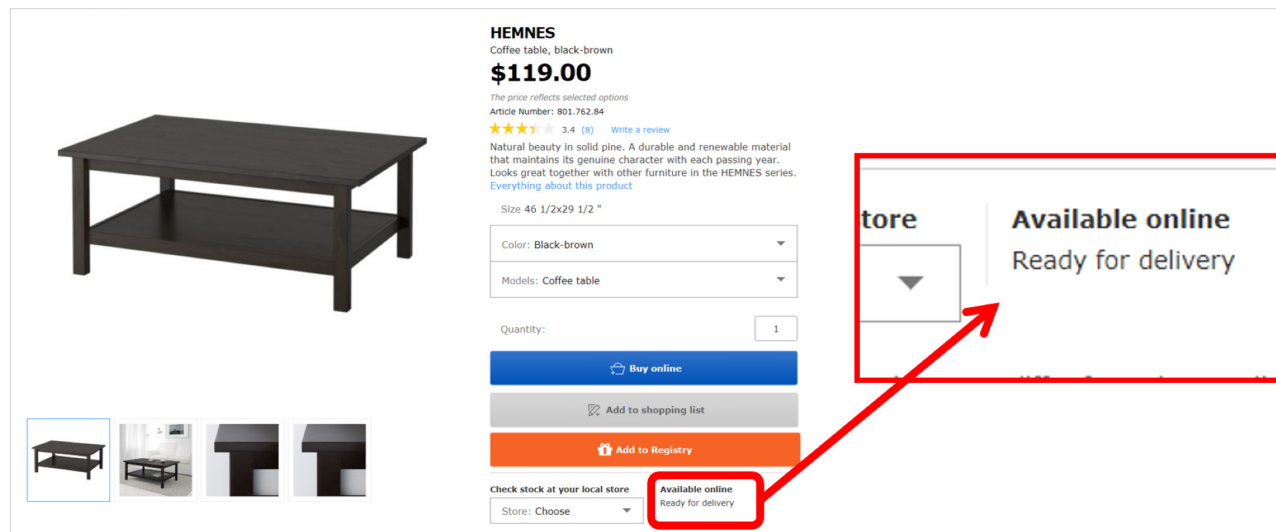
Figure 73 Product detail page indicating product available and ready for delivery

Upon clicking the "Buy Online" button, the shopper receives the following message:
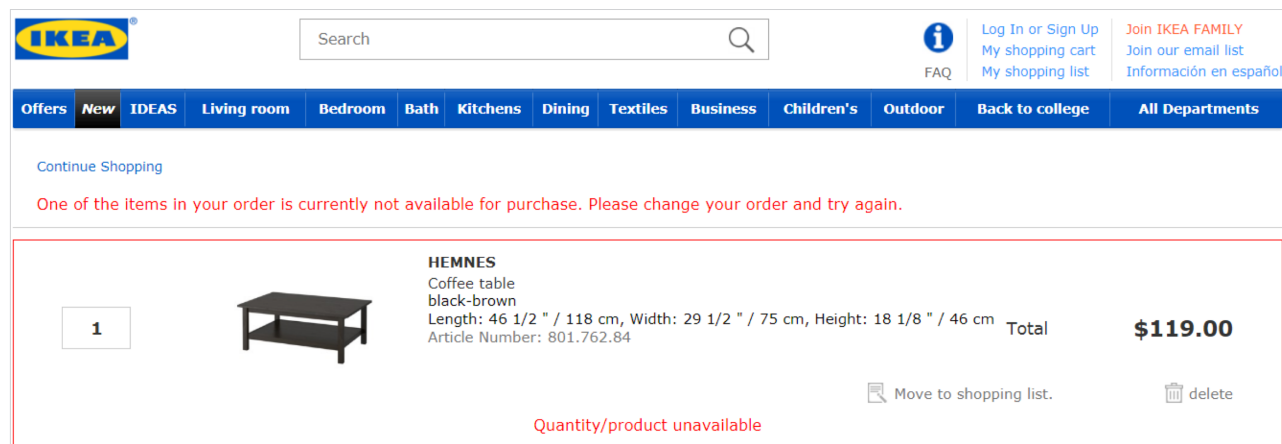
Figure 74 Error message upon attempting to buy

HEADSCRATCHER

Anyone who's experienced this knows how frustrating this is as a customer. When a product detail page says something is available, it should be safe to assume it actually is. Not to mention, the error message isn't the most customer friendly.
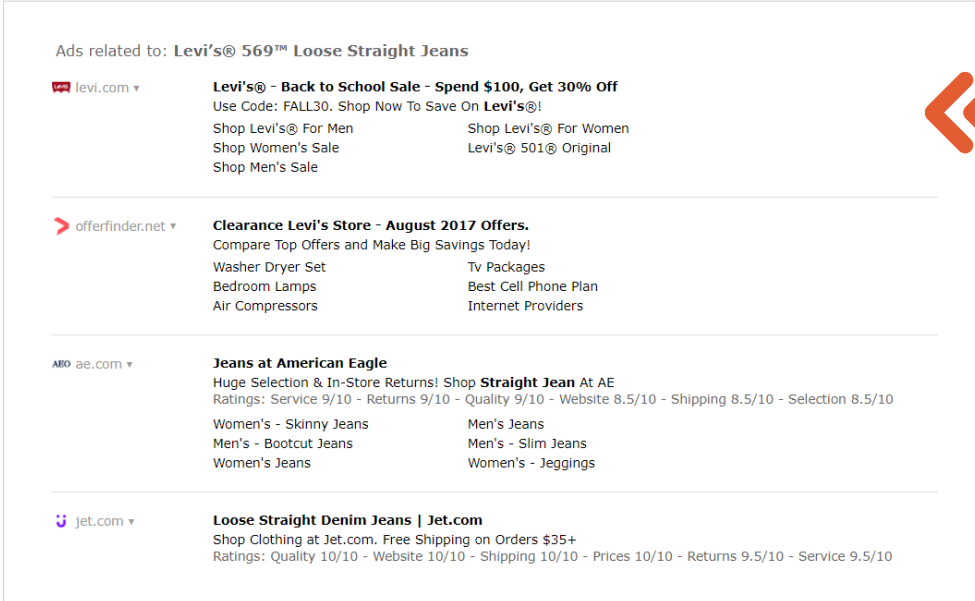
3. MISGUIDED MONETIZATION OF PRODUCT DETAIL PAGES

SCENARIO

Imagine walking into a retail clothing store like JC Penney or Kohl's determined to buy a pair of jeans. You walk to the jeans section and see the tables and racks full of brands, sizes, and various styles. Seems simple enough, right? Nothing unusual going on here.

Now, imagine that in that very same section you see signs that inform you of deals on jeans at competitive stores in the mall (or down the street). You see signs for jeans at American Eagle, Old Navy, the Levi's outlet, and more. Have you ever seen that in a mall? Didn't think so. You really don't have to go far to see this online. Below are some examples:

THIS WAS SEEN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PRODUCT DETAIL PAGE FOR LEVI'S 569 JEANS ON JCP.COM.

Figure 75 Affiliate ads at the bottom of the product detail page

Figure 76 More ads on a retailer's product detail page

Figure 77 Affiliate ads at the bottom of the product detail page

Figure 78 More ads on a retailer's product detail page

Figure 79 More ads on a retailer's product detail page

Figure 80 Ads (for another retailer) at the TOP of a search results page

LOOKING FOR A NINTENDO SWITCH?

HEADSCRATCHER

This trend towards attempting to monetize product detail pages by serving ads is alarming. While we understand the budget challenges that marketing and e-commerce departments face daily, we firmly believe that PDPs can be much better monetized if time was spent giving the customer a much better shopping experience. Plus, (granted, this is purely opinion) it looks tacky and cheapens the retailer's brand.

4. HOW TO KILL SALES ONLINE AND IN-STORE

SCENARIO

You're at work and remember that you want to get some new running shoes. Your plan is to see if they're available at the store on the way home, place an order, and pick them up.

For clear symptoms of why some retailers are struggling to adapt in today's world, look no further than this shoe retailer. To charge $7.99 to a customer for ordering online and picking up at the store is a horrible experience to put a shopper through.

Figure 81 Example of how to discourage BOTH online as well as brick and mortar sales

HEADSCRATCHER

This might make sense in a spreadsheet to a bean counter or operations manager, but it sure doesn't to your customer. In fact, it's a signal that you really don't WANT them to order online. A shoe retailer gets shipments of new product regularly (either from the manufacturer or some warehouse). This is just silly – especially when you consider the fact a buying customer is coming into the store, giving you a chance to sell them on other things. At a minimum, that customer is going to interact with a REAL human being at the store level and that associate can at LEAST hand the customer an incentive to come back.

5. WHEN "CLEAN DESIGN" MAKES IT HARD TO SELL

SCENARIO

You get past the cart/bag to the checkout process. You're not a frequent shopper and buying something online from a place not named Amazon is always a bit of a frustrating process. You're not the type that has the patience to read through all the details and you get easily annoyed when things aren't crystal clear. Like most twenty-first century humans, you have the attention span of a goldfish.

Below is an example of very "clean" design, but in this case, that's part of the problem. There's no color. There are no highlights. There is nothing to help that impatient shopper.

Figure 82 Payment page

HEADSCRATCHER
This is a clean payment page, but we would be curious to test some contrast and call outs on the page to make it easier to read.

For example, at LEAST use some light gray to break up the page a bit.

6. WHEN TOO MANY CHOICES MAKE IT HARD TO SELL

Figure 83 Example of potentially overwhelming the customer

HEADSCRATCHER

What this retailer is trying to do is understandable, but how overwhelming is this page at first glance?

7. IF IT'S NOT ACCEPTABLE IN STORE, WHY IS IT OK ONLINE?

SCENARIO

Imagine walking into the store and finding a pair of leggings that you absolutely love. You MUST have them. You look through the pile to discover that they don't have any left in medium. Just in case the sizes run different than what you're used to, you try on a small and a large. No luck.

You ask the sales associate if there are any more available. What is that sales associate likely to do?

Oh, one more thing!

This is a nationwide retailer that has multiple locations across a typical metropolitan area.

With that in mind, one of these two scenarios is most likely:

Figure 84 Store associate helping a customer

1. Inventory systems are often centralized, which means that sales associate can quickly see if the style and size are available at a nearby store. If so, the associate will give the customer the option of going there to pick it up or have it sent to the store they're standing in (free of charge, of course).

2. If the inventory system is not centralized, that associate will call around to other local stores to see if the style and size are available. If so, the associate will give the customer the option of going there to pick it up or have it sent to the store they're standing in (free of charge, of course).

Another thing that the store associate will NOT do is to curtly tell the customer to simply pick another size. No, that appears to be a job for the e-commerce store:

Figure 85 Prime example of how NOT to try and assist a customer

8. THE ULTIMATE CROSS-SELL FAIL

SCENARIO

a) Look at the product is in the cart (Big & Tall T-Shirt).

b) Look at the products being recommended.

c) Enough said.

Figure 86 No words. Just none.

9. THE POP UP THAT CAN'T TAKE A HINT

SCENARIO

This pop up does NOT go away without clicking on "Shop Holiday Lookbook". There's no X for closing out of it.

Figure 87 No way to get rid of the pop up except by closing the browser window

CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

We hope you enjoyed reading this study as much as we enjoyed creating it. We evaluate e-commerce sites all the time and are passionate about making the shopping experience better for customers. This 71 page study doesn't need a long drawn out conclusion so instead we'll leave you with three simple thoughts in mind:

1 Picture what is going through the mind of the customer at various points during the shopping experience you're giving them. Put yourself in their place as someone with a specific objective and ask yourself if the experience is helping or hindering.

2 What are you ok with the customer assuming? Do you want the customer to assume the next steps to take in the purchase journey or do you think it would be better to show them? Do you want the customer to assume this product is available and will be delivered within their desired timeframe or is it better to reassure them? Look at every step along the purchase path and ask yourself how clear you're being.

3 How are you making it easier for the customer? Your role as the one in charge of e-commerce should really boil down to making it easier for the customer to achieve their goals. That's it. Do this well, and other things will fall into place.

Thanks for reading!

The Team at NordicClick

ADDITONAL
RESOURCES

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

If you're interested in performing your own audit, you may visit
www.nordicclick.com/e-commerce-audit-checklist/ where you can download your own audit
checklist.

E-Commerce Audit Checklist			
Pre Checkout - Global Observations			
Checklist Item	**Circle One**		**Notes / Comments**
Is there an intrusive Pop ups upon landing?	Y	N	
Is there a site search feature?	Y	N	
Is it programmed to auto complete and present related options?	Y	N	
Is the shopping Cart/Bag icon clearly displayed and does it update as items are added (Ideally contents will show on mouse over vs requiring a click)?	Y	N	
Are links to FAQs, shipping details, return/cancel	Y	N	

Figure 88 NordicClick's E-Commerce Audit Checklist – available for download.

A FEW THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND...

If you do download the checklist, consider it a useful starting point to see what your
e-commerce program is doing right as well as what can be improved. Please note that our
complete audit includes the following:

1. Data and analysis from Web Analytics, Business Intelligence Tools, Proprietary
    platform systems, and/or whatever other relevant reporting platform measurements
    are available to us. This helps us to validate what the checklist tells us and what
    should be on it.

2. Traffic source performance: While the ultimate goal is to close a sale, the expected
    experience can vary depending on the source of your traffic. (Example: a new organic
    search visitor just exploring options will likely have a very different need than a long
    time, repeat buyer.)

3. Stakeholder Interviews: This is a critical piece of any audit as it helps provide valuable
    context and a greater understanding of legacy issues, limitations, and real business cases.

4. Post Purchase Analysis: What is the customer experience AFTER the purchase? That is as critical of a component as any when it comes to long term e-commerce success. For our Benchmark Study, we did NOT audit the post-purchase experience, so those Checklist items are not included.

5. Analysis of the particular e-commerce platform capabilities vs. the implementation and ongoing execution: Our team draws from a deep understanding of various e-commerce platforms to examine the various add ons', apps, modules, plugins, and custom-built capabilities as part of our audit. However, this requires administrative access and we did not have that for the Benchmark study.

6. Analysis of any backend technical integrations (CRM, ERP, fulfillment, email, inventory systems, etc.)

7. User Experience Testing: The insights from our full audit are most beneficial when paired with a full user experience test that has a sampling of typical customers go through the experience.

8. Subjective Analysis: Our full audit checklist does contain some items that are subjective in nature. To accomplish this, the conditions outlined above in items 1-7 must be present. In addition to that, the combined experience of our team allows us to provide valuable insights.

9. This checklist only includes yes/no/not applicable items. Since we only had access to public facing e-commerce websites for this study, we restricted the audit to questions that could only be answered without any subjectivity.

10. SEO or Paid Advertising Audit: These are separate services, but we do often bundle our audits together. It goes without saying that there is e-commerce functionality that is vital to success, but if not properly implemented could have dire implications on other channels (especially the technical side of SEO).

11. Lastly, this e-commerce audit checklist is updated frequently based on new technologies, trends, and other factors. Be sure to always have the latest!

If you have any questions or find that you need a more comprehensive e-commerce audit, strategy, implementation, or execution, please contact us. We would be happy to talk to you.

Good luck in your e-commerce endeavors!

ABOUT
NORDICCLICK INTERACTIVE

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Businesses hire NordicClick Interactive for one simple reason: To help them efficiently acquire new customers through digital channels.

We are a full service digital marketing agency located in Minneapolis, MN with a global footprint of clients. From a high level, services include:

- E-Commerce Management

- Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

- Paid Media (Search, Display, Remarketing, Social)

- Web Analytics Management

- Web Development

- Email Management

- Pay for Performance Marketing

- Strategic Consulting & Training

For more information, please visit us online:

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