Evaluating 25 E-Commerce Search Engines
Introduction

This is 37signals' report on the usability and usefulness of search engines and search results from 25 of the Internet's leading online retailers.

Answering real questions

For each site we tested and reviewed, the report answers the following questions:

1. Are the search results at this site accurate and relevant?
2. If I misspell a search term, does the site know what I mean and provide useful results?
3. Can I sort the search results by price, brand, availability, and/or other useful criteria?
4. Will the site find related words and common synonyms for terms I use in my search (e.g. “soda” and “pop”)?
5. Can I search using mixed specifications such as gender, color, etc. (e.g. Will a search for “red wool men’s sweater” show me red wool men’s sweaters)?
6. What happens if the site returns no results? Will it help me or provide tips?

What you'll learn

The 150+ examples and in-depth analysis in this report will teach you how to improve your site's search results. You'll discover the techniques used by top online retailers and learn from the mistakes of subpar sites. The report concludes with a comprehensive set of best practices you can implement on your site today.
## Report Card & Key Findings

Our ratings for the 25 sites plus key findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Accuracy/Relevance</th>
<th>Misspelled Search Term(s)</th>
<th>Mixed Specifications</th>
<th>Synonyms and Related Terms</th>
<th>Sorting/Filtering Results</th>
<th>No Results Found</th>
<th>Overall Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lands' End</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★★</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>L.L. Bean</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
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<td>Wal-Mart</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams-Sonoma</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crate &amp; Barrel</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>Pottery Barn</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Wine.com</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-800-flowers.com</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
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</tr>
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<td>★★★★</td>
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<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Apple Store</td>
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<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>★★★★</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Key Findings

#### The bad

- **72%**: ...of the sites could not consistently match misspelled search terms with the proper products.
- **68%**: ...offered minimal or no sorting/filtering options of search result lists.
- **64%**: ...were unable to consistently match mixed specification searches to valid results.
- **56%**: ...failed to handle synonyms and related terms at an acceptable level.
- **56%**: ...provided little or no help on their “No Results Found” pages.

#### The good

- **92%**: ...of the sites presented accurate and relevant results for perfect, error-free searches.

### Breakdown

#### Accuracy/Relevance
- 8% Good
- 0% Poor

#### Synonyms and Related Terms
- 44% Good
- 16% Poor

#### Misspelled Search Term(s)
- 28% Good
- 48% Poor

#### Mixed Specifications
- 36% Good
- 28% Poor

#### Sorting/Filtering Results
- 32% Good
- 32% Poor

#### No Results Found
- 44% Good
- 8% Poor
Testing Criteria
The tests, the basic testing procedure, and testing FAQs

The tests (details for each test are found on the following 6 pages)

1. **Accuracy/Relevance** “Are these results useful?”
2. **Misspelled Search Term(s)** “Does the site know what I mean?”
3. **Sorting/Filtering Results** “Can I sort by price or brand?”
4. **Synonyms and Related Terms** “Does a search for ‘jackets’ also return ‘coats’?”
5. **Mixed Specifications** “Can I search the way I think about a product?”
6. **No Results Found** “No results? Now what do I do?”

Testing procedure

1. **First, we chose appropriate search terms for each site.** For example, at Williams-Sonoma, we may have chosen “wine glass” “Henckels” or “juice machine” while at L.L. Bean we may have chosen “duck boots” “rain coat” or “wool socks”. We then made sure that each search term actually exists on the site. That way, we did not unfairly penalize a site for failing to carry an item we were searching for.

2. **Next, we entered the search term(s) into the search box on the site’s homepage.** We performed only site-wide, simple searches, and ignored any advanced search options.

3. **Finally, we noted the search results, took screenshots, and assigned ratings.** After we assigned ratings, we converted these ratings into a bubble score (● = GOOD, ○ = OK, ○ = POOR). Details on how we converted ratings to bubble scores can be found on page 11.
Testing Accuracy/Relevancy

“Are the results accurate, relevant, and useful?”

Test description

This test seeks to measure how accurately retail search engines return results matching the exact, correct query (no spelling errors, related terms, etc.).

For example, a search for “Vacuum cleaner” on Target’s site should return vacuum cleaners at the top of the list (not vacuum accessories or bags before actual vacuum cleaners).

Testing method

For this test, we conducted 10 simple searches for items each site is known to carry. Depending on the site, our queries included terms like:

- Single item names (e.g. “jacket”)
- Double item names (e.g. “bath towel”)
- Brand name items (e.g. “Thinkpad”)
- Brand name items with descriptor (e.g. “Apple laptop”)
- Items by certain authors or artists (e.g. “Deepak Chopra”)

Good and bad examples

A good example from Williams-Sonoma

Searched for “bread knife” and was shown only bread knives in my results. No bread ovens or other types of knives.

A bad example from Best Buy

Searched for “DVD player” and was shown accessories, cables, headphones, and other items before any actual DVD players.
Testing Misspelled Search Term(s)
“If I misspell something during a search will the site know what I mean?”

Test description

This test measures how accurately retail search engines return results when the original query is misspelled.

For example, if someone was searching for a Canon Camera, but spelled Canon with two n’s (Cannon), a site that handled misspellings well would recognize the misspelling and provide results for Canon. A poor site would just say “no results found” even though they did carry Canon cameras.

Testing method

We tested a variety of misspellings at each site. Depending on the site, tests included misspelling:

• Brand names (e.g. “Motorolla” instead of “Motorola”)
• Category names (e.g. “Pilateese” instead of “Pilates”)
• Product names (e.g. “Airon” instead of “Aeron”)
• Product details (e.g. “Mahagony” instead of “mohagany”)
• Author or artist names (e.g. “Bill Mar” instead of “Bill Maher”)

We also checked for accuracy when hyphens or abbreviations were added or omitted (“Cyber-Shot” is correct, “CyberShot” isn’t).

Good and bad examples

A good example from Crate & Barrel

Searched for “Candel” and was pleasantly surprised to be shown results for “Candle” (proper spelling).

A bad example from the Apple Store

Searched for “Hewlett-Packerd” and was told that no items were found even though Apple carries multiple Hewlett-Packard (proper spelling) products.
Testing Sorting/Filtering
“Can I sort the results by criteria such as price, brand, availability, etc.?“

**Test description**

This test measures how flexibly retail search engines permit re-sorting and/or filtering of search results.

For example, a good site allows customers to sort search results by price, brand, availability, etc. A poor site just presents the results but provides no ability to sort or filter the results.

**Testing method**

Unlike the previous four tests, we did not run the Sorting/Filtering test multiple times unless we noted inconsistencies in the way a particular site treated this functionality. Instead, we first recorded whether or not the site actually offered sorting or filtering of any kind. Then, for sites which offered this feature, we noted how clear, useful, and usable the options were.

**Good and bad examples**

**A good example from CDW**

[Searched for “firewire” and got a page of useful results with many different ways to filter them and browse within the results.]

**A bad example from MotherNature.com**

[Searched for “echinacea” and got 124 results with no way to narrow down the products by price, brand, number of pills, etc.]
Testing Synonyms and Related Terms

“Does a search for ‘jackets’ also display results for ‘coats’?”

**Test description**

This test seeks to measure if and how well retail search engines handle common synonyms for items they carry.

For example, if someone were searching for a “floor covering” but the store labeled its floor coverings as “rugs,” a good site would recognize the related terms and provide results for rugs. A poor site would say “no floor coverings found” and potentially lose a sale.

**Testing method**

We tested several types of synonyms and related terms. Depending on the site, our queries included:

- Close synonyms (e.g. “mobile phone” instead of “cell phone”)
- Distant synonyms (e.g. “optical media” instead of “CD-R”)
- Branded names (e.g. “Wi-Fi” instead of “802.11b”)
- Different spellings (e.g. “file cabinet” instead of “filing cabinet”)
- Simple plurals (e.g. “screwdrivers” instead of “screwdriver”)
- Complex plurals (e.g. “knives” instead of “knife”)
- Acronyms (e.g. “SLR” instead of “Single Lens Reflex”)

**Good and bad examples**

**A good example from Lands’ End**

[Searched for “hoodie” and got some very close matches.]

**A bad example from L.L. Bean**

[Searched for “hoodie” and got nothing, despite the fact that “hooded sweatshirt” returns many results.]
Testing Mixed Specifications

“Can I search the way I think about a product?”

**Test description**

This test measures how well retail search engines return results when the query contains a phrase that describes the desired product, rather than the label assigned by the site.

For example, on a good site a search for “$75 men’s shoes,” would return men’s shoes in the $75 range. An OK site might just return shoes, but without a price filter applied to the results. A poor site might just say “none found.”

**Testing method**

We tested a variety of common scenarios at each site. Depending on the site, scenarios included:

- Mixing gender and products (e.g. “Women’s sweaters”)
- Mixing prices and products (e.g. “$50 radio”)
- Mixing details and products (e.g. “Red jacket”)
- Mixing specials and products (e.g. “Skirts on sale”)
- Mixing sizes and products (e.g. “40 GB hard drive”)

**Good and bad examples**

**A good example from REI**

[Screenshot of a product listing for a Teton Jacket]

Searched for “$50 fleece jacket” and was shown two jackets made out of fleece, both costing about $50.

**A bad example from Wal-Mart**

[Screenshot of a search results page]

Searched for “red plastic chair” and was shown nothing despite the fact that Wal-Mart does carry red plastic chairs.
Testing No Results Found
“No results were found? Why not and now what do I do?”

**Test description**

This test measures how well retail search engines handle queries that yield zero results.

For example, if no matches were found, a good site would explain possible reasons why no matches were found, provide tips on how to expand the search, and provide an opportunity to search again. A poor site might just say “no results found” and provide little or no help or tips.

**Good and bad examples**

**A good example from RedEnvelope.com**

![Example](image1)

Searched for “powerbook” and got many different options to get back on track – including the option to chat with a live person.

**A bad example from Finish Line**

![Example](image2)

Searched for “ECCO” within “Basketball Shoes” and got this plain page with no way back, no tips, no help, nothing.
Testing and Scoring the Sites
Getting down and dirty with the 25 online retailers

On the following 25 pages, we test and review the 25 sites. The tests encompassed over 1,000 search terms and were conducted between October 15 – 25, 2002.

This report focuses exclusively on a site’s “simple search” functionality. We define a simple search as a single search box with no additional or advanced options. Each search was performed from the site’s homepage. We did not test any “advanced/detailed search” features.

For each of the six tests, a site received the following rating:

- **Good**: Best-of-breed.
- **OK**: Acceptable but ample room for improvement.
- **Poor**: Unacceptable, requires immediate attention.

Additionally, we calculated an overall score for each site based on its performance in the six tests. That score is presented on each review page in the graphical format displayed below. Details on how we arrived at the overall score can be found at right.

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### Assigning points for each trial
For search term dependent tests (Accuracy/Relevancy, Misspelled Search Terms, Mixed Specifications, and Synonyms and Related Terms), **we ran 10 trials with 10 different search terms**.
For the other tests (Sorting/Filtering Results and No Results Found), we conducted one trial for each site. Each trial received either a 1, 0, or -1 depending on how well the site performed. For example, eBay received the following trial totals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy/Relevancy (10 trials)</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misspelled Search Terms (10 trials)</td>
<td>-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Specifications (10 trials)</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms and Related Terms (10 trials)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting/Filtering Results (1 trial)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Results Found (1 trial)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Creating the bubble ratings
For multiple trial tests, we assigned a “Good” to a score of 4 or higher, an “OK” to a score of -3 to 3, and a “Poor” to anything below -3. For single trial tests, we assigned a “Good” to a score of 1, an “OK” to a score of 0, and a “Poor” to a score of -1. Continuing with the eBay example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Rating</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy/Relevancy (10)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Good" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misspelled Search Terms (-10)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Poor" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Specifications (-4)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Poor" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms and Related Terms (4)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Good" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting/Filtering Results (1)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Good" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Results Found (0)</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="OK" /></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Calculating the overall scores
Finally, we calculated an overall score based on the bubble ratings. Giving all tests equal weight, we reconverted the bubble ratings – a “Good” bubble became a 1 for that test, an “OK” bubble became a 0, and a “Poor” bubble became a -1. By adding up all six (6) scores, we arrived at the site’s overall score. So, eBay’s final score was:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy/Relevancy (Good)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misspelled Search Terms (Poor)</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed Specifications (Poor)</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synonyms and Related Terms (Good)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorting/Filtering Results (Good)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Results Found (OK)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall Score</strong></td>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1-800-flowers.com
Flowers, plants, gourmet foods, candies, gift baskets, and more
http://www.1-800-flowers.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

A search for “Mother’s Day” returns 163 flower arrangements and other gifts applicable to the popular holiday.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Although they carry several products featuring “lavender,” 1-800-flowers.com fails to find a single result if you type “lavendar.”

Mixed Specifications

Searching for terms like “chocolate sampler box” and “$50 gift basket” returns zero results on 1-800-flowers.com.

Synonyms and Related Terms

1-800-flowers.com catches several synonyms, in this case recognizing that you mean “chocolates” when you search for “confections.”

Sorting/Filtering Results

Despite the often large list of matches, 1-800-flowers.com gives you no way to filter your initial set of results.

No Results Found

While the site does not offer recommendations or related links for failed searches, 1-800-flowers.com does provide clear messaging and a chance to search again.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Like most of the sites examined in this report, 1-800-flowers.com does a good overall job returning relevant results for simple searches like “Mother’s Day” and “gift basket.” And while we did not test for this, the site provides image thumbnails for most products, helping you quickly identify the best match without having to click through to a product detail page.

Where they can improve
1-800-flowers.com falls flat in the majority of our tests. Particularly poor was the site’s performance in the Misspelled Search Term and Mixed Specification tests, missing 80% and 100% of our search terms respectively. On a site where flower names are likely to be misspelled, we find 1-800-flowers.com’s lack of flexibility particularly damaging to the customer experience.
Amazon.com
Books, music, movies, electronics, tools, kitchen appliances, and more
http://www.amazon.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

Home & Garden: See all results

- Rotozip 101225 Revolution
- Rotozip SCS02 Cordless Saw

Searching for "rotary saw" on Amazon.com correctly returns a thorough set of results under their "Tools" and "Home & Garden" categories.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●

Results: we were unable to find Handspring Treo. Please try again?

Amazon.com frequently catches as many misspellings as it misses, displaying zero results for this popular PDA while accepting errors like "Sarah McLaughlin."

Mixed Specifications ●

Click these links to see catalog pages:
- words, read reviews, and order products

"Used Nikon digital camera" Edmund Industrial Optics - 201

A search for "used Nikon digital camera" fails to find a match in any of Amazon.com's own departments.

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

Cell Phones: See all 45 results

- Sony Ericsson T68i Phone
- Phone

Flexibly handling synonyms much of the time, Amazon.com returns "cell phone" results for a search on "mobile phones."

Sorting/Filtering Results ○

Books: See all 109 results

- The Nikon Flash Guide --
- A Short Course in Nikon C

Though they do offer filters on their more detailed search results pages, Amazon.com's initial search results list gives you no such options.

No Results Found ●

Amazon.com offers clear messaging, popular alternative links, and a new search box when it fails to find a match for your query.

The Bottom Line

What they're doing well

Amazon.com performed above average in our testing, generally returning accurate results and catching most synonyms. The site also shines when it cannot locate a match at all, displaying a clearly-worded explanation of what happened and tips to help you improve your next search attempt.

Where they can improve

With only average Misspelled Search Term and Mixed Specification scores, Amazon.com often makes it difficult to find even common products when you make small mistakes or are overly specific in your search. With such a varied collection of products, both new and used, improvements in both areas would reduce the number of failed search attempts. Adding even basic sorting or filtering options on the initial results screen would also be a welcome improvement.
The Apple Store
Macs, displays, software, iPods, cameras, accessories, and more
http://store.apple.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

The Apple Store commonly overlooks directly-related products, failing in this case to display Mac OS X following a search for “Jaguar” (the popular marketing codename).

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Apple’s rigid spelling requirements miss dozens of HP printers and scanners when you misspell “Hewlet-Packard.”

Mixed Specifications

Such phrases as “4 megapixel digital camera” and “financial planning software” frequently return such erroneous results like this eMac.

Synonyms and Related Terms

Despite catching a few synonyms, The Apple Store returns completely different results for similar terms like “Wi-Fi” and “802.11b.”

Sorting/Filtering Results

Beyond this link to more results, The Apple Store does not give you any sorting or filtering options.

No Results Found

Unable to find a match, The Apple Store offers a concise message but does not provide tips on improving your next search.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Although known for selling simple, easy-to-use computers, The Apple Store’s search engine does not offer a frustration-free experience. Throughout our testing, we found few areas where The Apple Store lived up to the company’s reputation as a design leader.

Where they can improve
The Apple Store could improve in every area we examined in this report. Notably, the site was appalling when confronted with misspelled search terms and often returned completely different results for simple plurals like “USB cable” and “USB cables.” When it came to Mixed Specification searches, the site frequently returned everything but the product for which we were searching. If Apple hopes to increase direct sales through its online store, they company needs to get serious about searching soon. Otherwise, Apple risks frustrating more customers than it satisfies.
BestBuy.com
Electronics, music, movies, appliances, phones, TVs, and more
http://www.bestbuy.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

A search for “DVD players” does not return the results you’d expect from BestBuy.com, displaying remote controls and headphones as the top results.

Mixed Specifications

Searching for common BestBuy.com products like “20GB iPod,” “HP inkjet replacement cartridge” or “Pentium 4 notebook computer” returns zero results.

Sorting/Filtering Results

Aside from grouping results in related categories, BestBuy.com does not give you any options for sorting or filtering your results.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

BestBuy.com does a relatively good job catching spelling errors, in this case showing results for “Pioneer” when you type “Pionneer.”

Synonyms and Related Terms

Although “mobile phone” correctly maps to “cellular phone,” a search for “washing machine” or “video camera,” fails to locate “washers” and “camcorders” they carry.

No Results Found

Although the site does not always do so, BestBuy.com will often display related categories and search tips to help you refine your query.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Though they did not outperform such leaders as Drugstore.com and Lands’ End, BestBuy.com did a good overall job catching our spelling errors. Whether leaving letters out or adding extra ones, BestBuy generally was flexible enough to provide acceptable results.

Where they can improve
One of the few sites in this report to receive only an “Acceptable” score for Accuracy/Relevance, BestBuy.com should begin by reducing the number of extraneous results displayed for common searches like “VCR” and “DVD player” where links to accessories and other peripherals often predominated. With plenty of competition from Crutchfield, Amazon.com, and Circuit City, BestBuy.com can’t afford to hide big ticket items pages into their search results. The site would also do well to improve its handling of Mixed Specifications searches, performing poorly 90% of the time in testing. Finally, along with many other sites in this report, BestBuy.com would benefit from offering basic sorting/filtering options on the initial search results screen.
CDW
Computers, software, electronics, and more
http://www.cdw.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance  ●

Category matches
- AppleTalk Networking
- Classroom Training Networking
- Installation - Networking

Searching for “wireless networking” on CDW correctly displays results under such categories as “AppleTalk networking” and “Proxim/Orinoco.”

Misspelled Search Term(s)  ○

CDW cannot find a single match when you make common misspellings like “Symantech” or leave out the space in “WindowsXP.”

Mixed Specifications  ○

computers under $1000

Although they carry several related products, CDW does not return accurate product results for “computers under $1000” or “800MHz titanium powerbook.”

Synonyms and Related Terms  ●

282 Products found for Wi-Fi

CDW does a good job matching synonyms, in this case locating “802.11b” and “Airport” results when you search for “Wi-Fi.”

Sort/Filtering Results  ●

CDW helps you quickly filter long result lists by manufacturer, category, keyword, and more. This is important given the depth of their product mix.

No Results Found  ○

When it cannot locate a match, CDW displays a clear explanation of what happened and gives you a helpful advanced search form.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
CDW offers very accurate results for most searches, displaying them in order of relevance while at the same time grouping them by popular category. Nevertheless, these result lists can often be extremely long for broad categories like “networking” and “peripherals.” Thankfully, CDW provides an effective filtering tool at the top of each page, allowing you to quickly refine your initial search. And while not the friendliest page in this report, CDW’s No Results Found screen is notable for its thorough list of options.

Where they can improve
CDW’s Achilles’ heel is Misspelled Search Terms, failing 90% of the time in our tests. Whether completely misspelled or simply missing a letter or two, spelling errors of all kinds typically returned zero results. And like many of the sites in this report, CDW also faired poorly on the Mixed Specifications test, routinely missing even prominently-featured products. Better handling of Mixed Specifications would be a welcome improvement to a site where many customers arrive with definite products in mind.
Crate & Barrel
Furniture, kitchen, dining, accessories, and more
http://www.crateandbarrel.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

You searched for "wine glass".

Crate & Barrel smartly promotes the most relevant matches to the top of the list, displaying "wine glasses" before other types of drinking containers.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Your search for "votif" did not return Results displayed are for "votive".

Instead of asking for clarification, Crate & Barrel correctly guesses that you mean "votive" when you search for "votif."

Mixed Specifications

Search again: sub-$800 wardrobe

Although they do carry a wardrobe for $799, Crate & Barrel's search engine cannot locate any wardrobes when your search is this specific.

Synonyms and Related Terms

You searched for "xmas".

Crate & Barrel gets many synonyms right, here matching "Xmas" with "Christmas" and returning appropriate results.

Sorting/Filtering Results

Beyond simple page numbers, Crate & Barrel offers no other way to sort or filter long result lists.

No Results Found

When your search returns zero results, Crate & Barrel provides a new search box below a clearly-worded explanation of what just happened.

What they’re doing well
Crate & Barrel really shines when it comes to misspellings, catching every one of our mistakes during testing. As an added bonus, the site makes note of the spelling error, presumably so that you do not make the same mistake twice. Crate & Barrel also catches most synonyms, giving you the sense that you do not have to “play by their rules” to find the products you want.

Where they can improve
Crate & Barrel could improve the customer experience a great deal by offering basic filtering options. This is especially important for smaller items where price and color could decide a purchase. And although they do a fair job with Mixed Specification searches, Crate & Barrel could do a better job. The faster retail sites like this can connect potential customers with popular, high-margin products the better.
Crutchfield
Car and home audio, electronics, phones, and more
http://www.crutchfield.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

- DVD/VCR Combo Decks
- VCRs & Digital Video
- VCRs

While they sometimes display more results than you can easily manage, Crutchfield generally offers accurate matches for search terms like “VCR.”

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Crutchfield commonly fails to recognize even small misspellings, failing to locate “Pioneer” when you search for “Pionneer.”

Mixed Specifications

no match for digital camera under $500

Doing a fair job with complex searches, Crutchfield finds close matches for “digital cameras under $500” while missing “sub-$200 MiniDisc player.”

Synonyms and Related Terms

Speakers
- Floor-standing Speakers
- Powered Subwoofers

Synonyms frequently return very different results, here displaying a completely different list for “50W amp” when compared to “50 watt amplifier.”

Sorting/Filtering Results

- Car Installation
- Car Video Installation
- Monitor Housings

Unless you navigate through several pages, Crutchfield does not offer any way to sort or filter your initial results.

No Results Found

Search hints:
- This search engine searches all model number, or item number format
- Try typing only the first part of the

By breaking search terms down into simpler parts and offering a 1-800 number, Crutchfield provides several helpful options to get you back on track.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
With informative, friendly content, Crutchfield’s “No Results Found” page was among the best in this report. In fact, it was one of the few sites to prominently feature a toll-free telephone number following a failed search, giving customers an alternative to continued searching.

Where they can improve
Failing to match 90% of our misspelled queries, Crutchfield performed poorly when faced with Misspelled Search Terms. On a site where such brand names as “Rockford Fosgate” are apt to be misspelled, we found this particularly frustrating, even with such a friendly “No Results Found” page. Moreover, when simple searches like “DVD player” return such large result sets, Crutchfield’s lack of even basic sorting/filtering requires customers to dig several pages into the site to locate their desired product.
Drugstore.com

Health, beauty, wellness, personal care, and pharmacy products
http://www.drugstore.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

A search for “dental floss” returns two pages of relevant results — Drugstore.com correctly skips other “dental” products like toothbrushes and toothpaste.

Mixed Specifications ●

close matches

aromatherapy candle: see all
• Caldrea, 60 Hour Aromatherapy Candle

When confronted with a specification search like “anti-stress aromatherapy candle,” Drugstore.com consistently displays very close matches.

Sorting/Filtering Results ●

product matches

show products in brand:
- All -

Drugstore.com allows you to filter by brand name while also providing links to sort by product name/price.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ○

search again?

Though they do carry many different types of “Chondroitin,” Drugstore.com is unable to locate this joint medication when you search for “Chondroitan.”

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

Whether you search for “nutrition bars” or “energy bars,” the site routinely returns matching results.

No Results Found ●

In addition to providing search tips, Drugstore.com often provides links to closely-matching sections as well as a chance to search again.

The Bottom Line

Drugstore.com does just about everything well. Particularly impressive was the site’s handling of Mixed Specification searches, where it caught 95% of our queries and displayed relevant results each time. In this area, Drugstore.com is a model for others to follow. Likewise, the site is very flexible when it comes to Synonyms and Related Terms, correctly identifying 100% of our queries.

What they’re doing well

Surprisingly, Drugstore.com misfires completely when it comes to Misspelled Search Terms. For a site where product names like “Oscillococcinum” and “Chondroitin” are common, we expected greater flexibility in this area. Many medications, herbal remedies, and brand names on Drugstore.com simply aren’t easy to spell correctly on the first try. Refining the search engine to accept or learn from these errors could mean fewer headaches for customers.

Where they can improve

Drugstore.com allows you to filter by brand name while also providing links to sort by product name/price.
eBay
Auctions for everything and anything under the sun
http://www.ebay.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

Although the sheer size of its listings cannot hurt, eBay routinely displays accurate results for all types of search terms.

Mixed Specifications

eBay does a better than average job locating matches for complex searches but misses common terms like "$100 MP3 player."

Sorting/Filtering Results

eBay gives you the ability to sort result lists by such useful criteria as price, listing date, and the auction ending time.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

While they do carry dozens of matching items, eBay fails to return results when you type "Sarah McLaughlin" or "Canon Surshot" in the search field.

Synonyms and Related Terms

Despite finding two accurate results for “Single Lens Reflex camera,” eBay misses dozens of results for the matching “SLR.”

No Results Found

Though they rely on you to find the sidebar search box, eBay does provide several tips to help you refine your next search.

What they're doing well

The diverse product mix on eBay could have been a double-edged sword in our Accuracy/Relevance testing. But instead of overwhelming us with only tangentially-related results, eBay deftly returned useful matches 100% of the time. The site also shines when it comes to sorting and filtering large result lists, giving buyers and sellers the option to sort by such eBay-specific criteria as “auction ending time” and “newly listed.” eBay’s handling of Mixed Specification searches, while not perfect, was also commendable.

Where they can improve

By comparison to its performance in our Accuracy/Relevance testing, eBay’s handling of Misspelled Search Terms was abysmal. Dropped letters, added letters, and complete misspellings all returned zero results during our tests – the sole exception being listings where the seller made the same mistake. And while not as poor, eBay’s handling of Synonyms and Related Terms also needs improvement. The site frequently returned very different matches for similar queries.
Finish Line
Sporting goods, shoes, apparel, and more
http://www.finishline.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ○

Searching for “Chicago Bulls” on Finish Line correctly returns a set of useful and relevant results.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ○

When you misspell “Yogah” in the site-wide search box, Finish Line quickly routes you to a set of accurate “Yoga” results.

Mixed Specifications ○

Although the site carries many related products, a search for “basketball shoes under $100” and “Randy Moss football jersey” returns zero results.

Synonyms and Related Terms ○

Apparently not synonymous with “running,” a search for “jogging” on Finish Line returns a completely different set of results.

Sorting/Filtering Results ○

Finish Line enables you to sort by several criteria. Unfortunately, you can also accidentally filter by a manufacturer or price that isn’t available.

No Results Found ○

Unable to find a matching product, Finish Line displays the bare minimum of information.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Finish Line’s strong suit is Accuracy/Relevance. In 80% of our queries, the site returned the sort of results we’d expect, leaving unrelated matches behind. At first glance, Sorting/Filtering also seems well-executed, but Finish Line’s inclusion of categories and price points which aren’t part of the initial set of results creates more problems than it solves.

Where they can improve
One of the more frustrating issues with Finish Line is its spartan “No Results Found” screen. Nearly blank, this page fails to offer assistance of any kind following a failed search - leaving you to pick up the pieces on your own. Unfortunately, the site’s poor performance on Mixed Specifications and Synonyms/Related Terms means you will likely see a lot of this page at FinishLine.com.
KBToys.com
Toys, board games, books, education, and more
http://www.kbtoys.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●
KBToys frequently returns accurate results for all types of toys and games, here returning Playstation games following a search for “Madden.”

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●
Generally doing a good job with misspellings, KBToys catches such typos as “Pokeman” and “Scoooby-doo” and returns useful results.

Mixed Specifications ○
The site does not handle complex specifications well, failing to locate any games whatsoever following a search for “Gamecube game under $40.”

Synonyms and Related Terms ●
When you search for “baking” or “videos” on KBToys, you will likely find the same results as “bake” and “movies.”

Sorting/Filtering Results ●
KBToys gives you the chance to sort your initial results by price, alphabetical order, and sales rank.

No Results Found ●
Friendly and informative, the zero results page on KBToys provides search tips, browsing links, and a new search box containing your original query.

What they're doing well
KBToys was a solid performer in five of the six search issues we analyzed, particularly when it came to Synonyms and Related Terms. The site's “No Results Found” page was also one of the friendliest we've come across, reflecting the playfulness of the brand without diluting the important messaging displayed on the page.

Where they can improve
Despite boasting good results in other tests, KBToys was especially poor when it came to Mixed Specifications, returning zero matches 70% of the time and doing only a fair job the other 30%. On a site where parents, grandparents, and cousins are likely to search for such items as “toys ages 9-12” and “plastic bulldozer,” there is definitely room for improvement in this area.
Lands’ End
Clothing, soft luggage, and products for the home
http://www.landsend.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

* Infant Blanket (Set of 3)
  - Same soft 5-oz. cotton
  - Luxurious to the touch
  - Just machine wash

A search for “flannel blanket” returns a categorized list of relevant results on Lands’ End.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

* Kids' Varsity Backpack
  - Rugged 600-denier
  - Adjustable straps
  - Chambers for extra

Handling most misspellings well, Lands’ End will accept such errors as “backpak” and “turdleneck,” returning results without demanding clarification.

Mixed Specifications

* Women's Regular GORE-TEX
  - Fully waterproof and breathable
  - Hood adjusts at the back
  - Storm cuffs lock out

When asked to interpret such specification searches as “Women's gore-tex parka,” Lands’ End has little trouble finding close matches.

Synonyms and Related Terms

* Striped Worsted Wool Scarf
  - 100% wool, tightly woven
  - Generous 65” x 9
  - Versatile stripe sty

Whether you search for “scarf” or “scarves,” “khakis” or “chinos,” the site routinely displays relevant results.

Sorting/Filtering Results

* 

Although they offer sorting tools a few clicks into result lists, Lands’ End offers no such options on the initial page.

No Results Found

* Search Tips (Learn more)
  - Check for typos or misspellings
  - Broaden your search

Lands’ End gives you search tips, related links, and a new search box to help you easily get back on track after a failed search.

What they’re doing well

Like Petco, the other top performer in this report, Lands’ End has given its search engine careful attention – and it shows. The site is quick to catch misspellings and flexible with synonyms. Lands’ End is likewise undaunted by Mixed Specifications, correctly locating such terms as “yellow nylon backpack” and “Men’s deerskin slippers.” Clearly, Lands’ End’s search engine is more than an afterthought.

Where they can improve

The only problematic area on Lands’ End was its sort functionality, which was buried one page deep into the initial results list. Although it does allow you to filter your search by popularity, price, and alphabetical order, this option would be most useful on the first search results screen where customers are often presented with dozens of related products.
L.L. Bean
Family clothing, accessories, and merchandise for the outdoors
http://www.llbean.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●
L.L. Bean typically returns very accurate results, locating countless parkas, jackets, and coats following a search for “winter coat.”

Mixed Specifications ●
A search for “$50 dog bed” on L.L. Bean returns a very close match, displaying this “$49 travel dog bed” as the top result.

Sorting/Filtering Results ●
While the site does allow you to sort quickly by category and sub-category, L.L. bean gives you no further options for refining your search.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●
Matching “backpak” with “backpack” and “smartwoo” with “SmartWool,” L.L. Bean catches most misspellings.

Synonyms and Related Terms ●
When you search for such plurals as “scarves” or synonyms like “underpants,” L.L. Bean will return the results you’d expect for “scarf” and “underwear.”

No Results Found ●
Only somewhat helpful, L.L. Bean’s zero results page offers you a few brief suggestions but fails to give you other useful options.

The Bottom Line
What they’re doing well
L.L. Bean excels in the Mixed Specifications and Accuracy/Relevance tests, finding close matches in both of these categories 90% of the time. Whether searching for “Women’s gore-tex pac-lite parka” or “Nikon zoom binoculars,” the site rarely missed a beat.

Where they can improve
Sorting/Filtering and No Results Found were somewhat problematic for L.L. Bean’s otherwise reliable and accurate search engine. And while the site repeats your original search and gives you some basic instructions, L.L. Bean provides little added guidance following a failed search attempt. In the case of a failed search, L.L. Bean seems content to get away with the bare minimum while the rest of the site gives 110%.
Macy's
Clothing, jewelry, and accessories for men, women and children
http://www.macys.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance
Generally accurate, Macy's returns the most relevant results ahead of more distant matches, here returning several good links for “skillet.”

Misspelled Search Term(s)
Macy's frequently fails to catch misspellings, returning zero results for such terms as “Calbin Klein” and “Timbrland.”

Mixed Specifications
Doing only a fair job with complex searches, Macy's has no trouble with “men's cashmere sweater” but fails to locate “blue Tommy Girl track pant.”

Synonyms and Related Terms
Despite carrying all kinds of underwear for both men and women, Macy's returns zero results when you search for “underpants.”

Sorting/Filtering Results
While they do give you several sorting/filtering options, they are only available at the bottom of each page.

No Results Found
Short on detailed recommendations, Macy's only gives you a few tips to improve your failed searches.

The Bottom Line
Disappointing on several fronts, Macy's was nevertheless a great performer in our Accuracy/Relevance tests. The site correctly located 95% of our terms and presented genuinely useful results each time. In this case at least, Macy's online store performed like a helpful sales assistant.

What they're doing well
Despite its accuracy, Macy's falls short in many other areas. Particularly poor was the site's handling of Misspelled Search Terms, missing simple errors like “Estay Lauder” and “Cliniqu” in 80% of our queries. For a site offering such a varied product base with so many different brands represented, we'd expect more flexibility with spelling errors. Macy's also turned in a below average performance on our Mixed Specification test, correctly matching only 40% of our searches.

Where they can improve
Despite carrying all kinds of underwear for both men and women, Macy's returns zero results when you search for “underpants.”

What they are doing well
While they do give you several sorting/filtering options, they are only available at the bottom of each page.
MotherNature.com
Vitamins, herbs, natural remedies, bath and body, health food and more
http://www.mothernature.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

A search for “deodorant” on MotherNature.com returns a list of very accurate results.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Consistently failing to recognize even small typos, MotherNature.com finds zero results for such products as “carub powder” and “glicerine.”

Mixed Specifications

Although they feature this exact product elsewhere on their site, MotherNature.com cannot find a match for “exotic aromatherapy bath bar.”

Synonyms and Related Terms

While “drink mix” returns many relevant results, MotherNature.com doesn’t support a search for the synonymous “drink mixes.”

Sorting/Filtering Results

Aside from a somewhat confusing pagination feature, this site provides no method to sort or filter your results.

No Results Found

Relying on their site-wide search box for new searches, MotherNature.com gives you links to browse but few tips to get you back on track.

The Bottom Line

-6 -5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2 3 4 5 6
worst best

What they’re doing well
Although MotherNature.com ran into significant trouble elsewhere, the site was a consistently good performer in our Accuracy/Relevance tests. Thankfully, this site avoided showing us page after page of irrelevant results, sticking to the basics by pushing the most applicable items to the top of the list.

Where they can improve
MotherNature.com ran into tremendous difficulty matching spelling errors, synonyms, and specification searches. Every misspelling and every mixed specification we threw at the site failed to locate a single match. Moreover, 70% of the synonyms and related terms – whether simple or abstract – missed their mark. With product listings that include homeopathic cold remedies with hard-to-spell names and countless other vitamin and mineral supplements, MotherNature.com would do well to improve its search engine or risk losing customers to frustration.
PC Mall
Computers, software, electronics, and related accessories
http://www.pcmall.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

Although the search results page is somewhat cluttered, PC Mall's results are quite accurate, returning relevant matches for “slide scanner.”

Mixed Specifications ●

Specification searches like “64MB CompactFlash card” and “Compaq 15” flat panel monitor” commonly return useful results on PC Mall.

Sorting/Filtering Results ●

While potentially overwhelming to novice searchers, PC Mall gives you countless ways to filter your initial results.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●

A search for the popular antivirus software made by “McAfee” returns erroneous results when you type in “MacAfee.”

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

Missing as many related terms as it catches, PC Mall correctly locates “network switch” after a search for “switches,” but finds few results for “mice.”

No Results Found ●

Without much explanation of what went wrong, PC Mall sends you to an advanced search page following a failed search.

The Bottom Line

What they're doing well
Like so many others in this report, PC Mall generally returned accurate and relevant results for most simple searches. The site also excelled at Mixed Specifications, matching precisely such terms as “Compaq 15” flat panel monitor.” PC Mall’s product mix can be overwhelming, so it was helpful that we could quickly jump to relevant matches by simply typing in their specifications.

Where they can improve
PC Mall was only an average performer in our Misspelling and Synonym tests, often missing as many of our queries as it caught. Ideally, most people wouldn’t misspell “Windows XB” or “MacAfee,” but errors like this occur all the time. And with sites like Petco and Lands’ End raising the bar, more and more online shoppers are beginning to expect retail sites to fail intelligently. Likewise, an online computer retailer that cannot locate a single “mouse” following a search for “mice” is bound to feel a certain amount of frustration. PC Mall could do better.
Petco

Premium pet food, supplies, information and services
http://www.petco.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance  ●

Highly accurate the majority of the time, Petco returns exact matches for such queries as “bird feeder” and “Iams.”

Misspelled Search Term(s)  ●

Encountering a misspelling, Petco clearly explains what happened and displays a list of relevant, close matches.

Mixed Specifications  ●

A search for “blue retractable leash” finds an exact match for the popular dog accessory.

Synonyms and Related Terms

1. Dog:
2. Dog: Apparel: Bandanas & Accessories
3. Dog: Apparel: Boots
4. Dog: Apparel: Coats & Jackets

When you search for related terms like “canine” or “feline,” Petco has no trouble finding precise matches for “dogs” and “cats,” respectively.

Sorting/Filtering Results  ●

Providing filters at the top and bottom of each page, Petco gives you options to refine your initial search by price, relevance, popularity, and more.

No Results Found

Offering few recommendations or links, Petco nevertheless does a fair job explaining what went wrong after a failed search.

The Bottom Line

What they're doing well
Petco does just about everything well. Whether faced with mangled spellings, vague synonyms, or complex specification searches containing prices and measurements, this site performs like a helpful sales clerk. Throughout our testing, Petco's search engine proved how attention to detail can dramatically enhance the customer experience.

Where they can improve
The only complaint we had with Petco was its overly-simplistic “No Results Found” screen. Although the page does clearly explain what went wrong, it fails to offer tips or a new search box to help you get back on track.
Pottery Barn
Furniture, home accessories, candles, accessories, and more
http://www.potterybarn.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●
Returning thumbnails by default, Pottery Barn generally finds close matches for simple search queries the first time around.

Mixed Specifications ●
A search for “bookcases under $500” correctly returns three bookcases under $500.

Sorting/Filtering Results ●
Although Pottery Barn does offer pagination and category sorting, they do not go beyond these basic methods of filtering long result lists.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ○
While “votives” are a popular item at the Pottery Barn, a search for “votif” returns zero results.

Synonyms and Related Terms ●
Whether you search for “carpet” or “rug,” Pottery Barn accurately finds similar results.

No Results Found ○
Despite re-displaying your original search and offering a new search box, Pottery Barn does not offer hints or tips of any kind.

What they’re doing well
Midway through the production of this report, Pottery Barn revamped their search engine. Happily, all of the changes were for the better. Where previously it received Poor marks in our Accuracy/Relevance and Mixed Specifications tests, the company’s current site now fares extremely well, routinely matching simple and complex searches to accurate results. Thankfully, any changes Pottery Barn has made behind the scenes have not affected the site’s performance in our Synonyms test – the revised site continues to match 80-90% of our related terms.

Where they can improve
Despite the recent improvements Pottery Barn, the site continues to fumble spelling errors. Even such simple mistakes as “pilllows” and “knifes” return zero results 90% of the time. Moreover, once you’ve committed a spelling error, the site’s No Results Found page gives you few pointers to get you back on course after reaching a dead end.
QVC
Electronics, health/beauty, music, fashion, jewelry, and more
http://www.qvc.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

Panasonic DVD-RP56 Progr
Panasonic DVD-LA95 Portal
LCD
Panasonic DVD-LV70 Portal

With such a diverse product inventory from which to draw, QVC has little difficulty finding relevant results for “DVD player.”

Misspelled Search Term(s)

No Products Found

Offering little flexibility when it comes to spelling errors, QVC has trouble locating the popular “Canon Powrshot” and the common “antique vaz.”

Mixed Specifications

JVC RX7020 500 Watt Audio Digital/DTS
JVC RX9010 600 Watt Audio Digital/DTS

Catching a variety of complex search queries, QVC correctly finds an accurate list when you search for “JVC dolby digital receiver.”

Synonyms and Related Terms

Bush Birmingham Collection
Bush Citizen Collection Sofa
Sav-A-Sofa Twin Bed Saver
Large Beasley’s Dog Couch

Although it rightly matches “sofa” with “couch,” QVC often confuses such terms as “video cassettes” and “videotapes.”

Sorting/Filtering Results

Page: 1 2 3

QVC offers nothing beyond simple pagination when it comes to sorting and filtering your initial results.

No Results Found

No Products Found

As terse as they come, QVC’s “No Results” page gives you very little assistance.

The Bottom Line

While not as good as several other sites in this review, QVC handled Mixed Specification searches quite well. Terms like “gold irish Claddah ring” and “gray Birkenstock sandals” returned perfect results each time, the latter query finding an exact match despite our spelling “grey” as “gray.” With such a large and diverse mix of products, QVC’s ability to match specifications to actual results was a pleasant surprise.

Unfortunately for QVC customers, the site’s search engine does not perform quite so well in the other areas we examined. QVC was particularly poor at catching spelling errors, failing 100% of the time in our tests. Spelling mistakes of all kinds – from phonetic spellings to single letter errors – tripped the site up consistently. Adding insult to injury, these failed searches drove us to the worst “No Results Found” page in this report – a page featuring simply “No products found” and a button labeled “Keep Shopping.”
Red Envelope
Unique gifts for the bath, home, bar, and more
http://www.redenvelope.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●
Correctly identifying “wine glass,” Red Envelope displays a small but relevant list of results.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ○
Despite carrying such products as “votives” and “knives,” Red Envelope cannot match “votif” and “knifes” to the appropriate results.

Mixed Specifications ○

Synonyms and Related Terms ●
Catching several synonyms while missing others, this site rightly locates “pendants” in the jewelry category.

Sorting/Filtering Results ○
Red Envelope does not give you any options to filter your initial search results beyond simple pagination.

No Results Found ●
Helpful but not overly informative, Red Envelope gives you several recommendations and options when your search fails.

What they're doing well
Red Envelope fared well in our Accuracy/Relevance test, correctly matching 100% of our queries to useful results. The site's performance in this category made it easy to locate gifts when we had a particular occasion or product in mind. Red Envelope also features a helpful “No Results Found” screen, directing us to refine our search in a variety of ways while also offering live customer support via live chat.

Where they can improve
The site’s accuracy plummeted when it came to Misspelled Search Terms. Like QVC, Red Envelope was stymied by even small spelling mistakes, missing such terms as “fleec” and “loopha” 100% of the time. When you have a product in mind but aren’t certain of your spelling, Red Envelope leaves you high and dry. Likewise, Red Envelope's handling of Mixed Specification searches could use some refinement, locating only two of our search queries correctly. And although Red Envelope did catch “Father’s Day gift,” a site focused on gift shopping should be able to easily locate terms such as “$50 gift basket” and “birthday for ages 6-12.”
REI
Outdoor clothing, gear, accessories, information, and more
http://www.rei.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

Columbia Sportswear S
Price: $99.00

When you conduct a search for such terms as "winter coat" and "Gore-Tex," REI routinely displays very accurate results in many categories.

Mixed Specifications ●

Mountain Hardwear Ab
Price: $115.00

Doing a fair job matching "Men's Gore-tex boots" with good results, REI nevertheless returns nothing for searches like "women's Volkl alpine skis."

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●

Your search for "backpack" produces

Products Click the links below

Although REI catches "backpack" correctly, the site misses such typos like "snowshoing" and "fleece vest."

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

REI 700 Down EL +10 - Long
Sale Price: $169.99

REI deftly handles most plurals and synonyms — a search for "sleeping bags" returns the same results as "sleeping bag."

No Results Found ●

Make sure you've spelled all words correctly.

Type the single most important word.

Try searching for synonyms.

Offering several recommendations and a refined search interface, REI's zero results page helps you get back on track.

The Bottom Line

What they're doing well
REI was an above average performer in our Accuracy/Relevance and Related Terms tests, tracking down correct matches 80% of the time in both categories. For a site where "coat" and "jacket" are often synonymous, REI handles these searches like a seasoned sales clerk.

Where they can improve
The site struggled somewhat with Misspelled Search Terms and Mixed Specification searches. Generally missing as many searches as it caught, REI was particularly bad at catching small spelling errors like "witner coat" and "slippr." Mixed Specification searches were also, for the most part, poorly handled.
Target
Clothing, housewares, electronics, toys, music, movies, and more
http://www.target.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●
Searching for items like “DVD player” returns a set of very useful results on Target’s site.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ○
Target often fails to find matches for misspelled search terms, in this case missing “blanket” following a search for “blancket.”

Mixed Specifications ○
When you search for specific terms like “$40 George Foreman Grill” and “3 megapixel digital camera,” Target often fails to find a single result.

Synonyms and Related Terms ●
Though they do carry “sunblock,” Target returns zero results following a search for “sunscreen.”

Sorting/Filtering Results ○
Target organizes many results into categories, but fails to offer any further sorting or filtering options.

No Results Found ●
When your search fails, Target delivers a clean page with links to search tips and a detailed advanced search option.

The Bottom Line

What they're doing well
Target’s strongest showing was in our Accuracy/Relevance and No Results Found tests. For searches that are spelled correctly and which are not overly-specific, Target will commonly pinpoint useful results time and time again. Failing that, the site’s No Results Found page offers a good set of options to help you get back on track.

Where they can improve
Unfortunately, Target.com is less like its more familiar brick-and-mortar parent when it comes to catching spelling mistakes, synonyms, and mixed specification searches. Misspelled Search Terms and Mixed Specifications were particularly problematic for Target - the site missed 80% of our queries in each test. For customers accustomed to pulling a sales person aside in one of the company’s stores, Target’s search engine will surely disappoint.
Wal-Mart

Clothing, housewares, electronics, toys, music, movies, and more
http://www.walmart.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

At Wal-Mart, a search for “DVD player” pulls up a special landing page dedicated to DVD players and accessories.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●

Accepting many misspellings, Wal-Mart correctly matches “blanket” to results for “blanket.”

Mixed Specifications ●

Although the site misses “$50 George Foreman Grill,” it does catch common queries like “250 thread count sheets.”

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

Wal-Mart does a fair job with synonyms, missing roughly as many as it catches. In this case, “teflon” returns very different results from “nonstick.”

Sorting/Filtering Results ●

Though they do group results in categories, Wal-Mart does not give you any further options for refining your search.

No Results Found ●

Wal-Mart’s helpful zero results page offers clear search tips, a new search box, browsing links, and other recommendations to get you back on course.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Like its close competitor, Target, Wal-Mart performed well in our Accuracy/Relevance and No Results Found tests, matching 100% of our basic searches with useful results and sending us to a friendly, descriptive screen when our searches did fail. Wal-Mart was also above average when it came to Misspellings, barely blinking at such spellings as “expresso machine” and “opel pendent.”

Where they can improve
Achieving only acceptable results in our Synonyms/Related Terms and Mixed Specification tests, Wal-Mart often returned either erroneous matches or none at all. A sales associate would have no trouble understanding that by “teflon cookware” you mean “non-stick cookware” or that their “metal floor lamps” are in Aisle 5. Unfortunately, Wal-Mart has a fair amount of trouble understanding such searches. We also found Wal-Mart’s lack of even basic sorting/filtering options problematic when the site returned long result lists, leaving us to sift through the noise for specific manufacturers or price points.
Williams-Sonoma

Cookware, kitchen accessories and appliances, foodstuffs, and more
http://www.williamssonoma.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance

Cherry Salad Bowls
$34.00-$129.00

Searches for such terms as “salad bowl” and “Calphalon” routinely return accurate results on Williams-Sonoma.

Misspelled Search Term(s)

Apple Towels, Set of 2
$20.00

Despite catching “towell” and “knifes,” Williams-Sonoma also misses a fair number of misspelled search terms, including “canistar” and “stainelss.”

Mixed Specifications

Williams-Sonoma Stainless-Steel Measuring & Spoons
$9.00-$19.95

Williams-Sonoma does well with most specification searches, locating “stainless steel measuring cups” among other phrases.

Synonyms and Related Terms

Boutis Border Mats
$29.00-$79.00

Whether you search for “carpet” or “rug,” Williams-Sonoma correctly locates similar results.

Sorting/Filtering Results

No Results Found

- What if no results were found?
  Try searching again using fewer keywords or you’re shopping for a gift, try our help!
- How many keywords should I use?
  One keyword will locate a broad selection. For the best results, use two or three.

Beyond simple pagination links, Williams-Sonoma does not offer any means by which to filter your results.

With helpful tips and clear messaging, Williams-Sonoma gives you several options to correct a failed search.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
Williams-Sonoma was surprisingly adept at finding meaningful matches in our Mixed Specifications and Synonyms and Related Terms tests. Undaunted by queries like “overhead lamp under $200” and “Xmas,” the site seemed to understand anything we threw its way, no matter how vague or overly-specific. If a search did fail, Williams-Sonoma offered up a clear and explanatory “No Results Found” page to get us back underway.

Where they can improve
This site’s main weakness is its handling of Misspelled Search Terms, missing slightly more spelling errors than it caught. The site frequently missed searches where single letters were either added or left off – whether in the middle of the word or at the end. This is particularly important given the often confusing spellings of many cookware brands.
Wine.com
Wine, accessories, reviews, and information
http://www.wine.com

Performance on the 6 tests

Accuracy/Relevance ●

Whether you are searching for a “Chardonnay” or a wine from “R.H. Phillips,” Wine.com offers generally reliable and accurate results.

Mixed Specifications ●

Although this product is promoted on the site’s “no results found” page, Wine.com fails to locate “Waiter’s alloy corkscrew.”

Sorting/Filtering Results ●

The site lets you sort results by such criteria as price, rating, winery, and type.

Misspelled Search Term(s) ●

While the site does find results for “Chiante,” Wine.com runs into trouble when you misspell “Porte.”

Synonyms and Related Terms ●

Wine.com does only a fair job with synonyms, correctly finding “corkscrews” under “bottle opener” while confusing “South America” and “South American.”

No Results Found ●

With category photographs dominating much of the page, Wine.com’s zero results page offers few tips to help you fix a failed search.

The Bottom Line

What they’re doing well
As with the majority of sites in this report, Wine.com has search accuracy down pat, consistently finding relevant results for queries like “dessert wine” and “Cotes du Rhone.” Wine.com’s Sort/Filter options were also quite useful, allowing customers to sort by price, rating, wine type, and winery. If only shopping at the local wine store allowed such targeted shopping.

Where they can improve
Despite its accuracy, Wine.com stumbled somewhat with Misspellings, Synonyms, and Mixed Specifications. Correctly matching roughly half of our searches in these three tests, the site nevertheless missed terms like “Porte,” “White Zin,” and “New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc.” With such a varied selection of wines from all over the world at numerous price points, we expected Wine.com to be more flexible in these tests.
Best Practices

37signals’ recommendations for getting it right

Sites scoring consistently well in our tests are wonderful guides – they are the benchmark for straightforward, friendly product search experiences.

In the next six pages, we highlight 22 specific tactics our top performers are doing right when it comes to the retail search engine customer experience. From delivering relevant matches to offering clear alternatives to failed search attempts, these best practices will help you deliver a more usable and useful search experience.

It is important to note that these examples are not hard-and-fast rules for every single site or situation. Nor should they be considered the last word in search engine design. Rather, we offer these best practices as starting points.
Accuracy/Relevance
Best practices for displaying accurate and relevant results

We recommend you...

1. Return results that match all keywords before results that match single keywords. If someone searches for “wool sweater,” for example, results that match both words should be more prominent than those matching only “wool” or “sweater.”

2. Show the most relevant results at the top of the search results. For instance, a search for “DVD Players” should return DVD Players first, followed by DVD movies and accessories.

3. If results are broken into categories, show results from the category with the most relevant results first. When a search for “mens parka,” for instance, locates 20 matches in “Men’s” and only nine in “Outdoor Gear & Apparel,” the results in the “Men’s” category should be shown before “Outdoor Gear & Apparel” category.

4. Link directly to products inside categories. If results are broken into categories, provide direct product links and/or product images within those categories – don’t make your customers figure out which category they should dig into without visual or textual clues to guide them.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. **Lands’ End (pg. 23)**
   ![Wool Nordic Sweater](image)
   A search for “Wool Sweater” at Lands’ End returns a list with Wool Sweaters listed before other types of sweaters.

2. **Wal-Mart (pg. 34)**
   ![Portable DVDs \n DVD/VCR Combinations](image)
   A search for “DVD Players” at Wal-Mart returns a special DVD section page where DVD players are featured first.

3. **REI (pg. 32)**
   ![Your search returned 36 result(s), sorted by category](image)
   A search for “mens parka” first shows results from the Men's category then in less popular categories.

4. **PC Mall (pg. 27)**
   ![594 products found for: video card](image)
   A search for “video card” at PC Mall returns a variety of categories with direct links to products in those categories.
Misspelled Search Terms
Best practices for providing useful results for misspelled search terms

We recommend you...

1. Mine your search logs to identify common misspellings and map frequently-misspelled terms to accurate product keywords. For example, if “Johnny Cash” is often misspelled as “Jonny Cash,” make sure queries for that particular spelling return results for the intended musician.

2. Show the misspelled search term alongside the correct spelling. This will allow people to learn from their mistakes.

3. Allow common abbreviations, punctuation, hyphenations, and plurals. A search for “jackets” should return the same results as a search for “jacket.” Likewise, a search for “ATM” and “A.T.M” or “Hewlett-Packard” and “Hewlett Packard” should return the same results.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. Amazon.com (pg. 13)
   
   ![Example from Amazon.com](image)

   Amazon knows that someone who typed “Jonny Cash” really meant “Johnny Cash.”

2. Crate & Barrel (pg. 17)
   
   ![Example from Crate & Barrel](image)

   Crate & Barrel tells you your misspelling didn’t return results, but that the correct spelling did.

3. CDW (pg. 16)
   
   ![Example from CDW](image)

   “hewlett-packard” (with hyphen) or “hewlett packard” (without hyphen) return the exact same results at CDW.
Mixed Specifications

Best practices for providing useful results for searches with mixed specifications

We recommend you...

1. Allow people to search by mixing specifications such as price, color, size, and gender. Sites with highly specialized products should accommodate relevant keywords. For example, wine sites should allow customers to enter a mixture of region, vintage, wine type, and more. (i.e. “Sonoma Valley 1997 Merlot”).

2. Return matches that meet all criteria first, then return results that only match some of the keywords.
   For example, if no results were found for “Blue women's gore-tex pac-lite jacket,” the search engine should try different iterations of identifiable keywords such as “gore-tex jacket” or “women's jacket” or “blue pac-lite jacket”.

3. If price is included as a search term, return results near that price first, then show the other results.
   For instance, a search for “$50 pet beds” should return $50 pet beds first, followed by more/less expensive results that also match “pet beds”.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. **Wine.com** (pg. 36)
   ![Artesa 1997 Reserve Merlot Sonoma Valley, California](image)
   A search for “Sonoma Valley 1997 Merlot” returns a list of wines that match those mixed specifications.

2. **Lands' End** (pg. 23)
   ![Women's Regular GORE-TEX Jacket](image)
   No exact matches for “Blue women's gore-tex pac-lite jacket,” but a “Women's Regular GORE-TEX Jacket” was found.

3. **Petco** (pg. 28)
   ![Bar Pet Beds ON SALE](image)
   ![Loungers ON SALE](image)
   A search for “$50 pet beds” at Petco first shows pet beds around $50 then also displays cheaper pet beds.
Synonyms and Related Terms
Best practices for providing useful results for synonyms and related terms

We recommend you...

1. Map common synonyms and related terms to the primary term you use to describe an item (“Floor covering” should also return “Rug”). As with misspelled search terms, mine your search logs often to spot frequent synonyms and related terms.

2. Let people know that while no results were found for their search, results were found for synonymous or related terms. Wherever possible, map search terms to synonymous keywords. When displaying these results, clearly state that no results were found for the original search term but results were found for the similar word or phrase.

3. If exact matches for the search actually do exist, display them first whenever possible, followed by applicable synonyms & related terms. For instance, if a customer searches for “jogging” and your search engine finds one exact match but 35 matches for “running,” display the single “jogging” match first, followed by the next 35 synonymous matches.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. **Target** (pg. 33)
   
   A search for “floor covering” returns results for rugs.

2. **Crate & Barrel** (pg. 17)
   
   “Turkey cooker” doesn’t return any results, but Crate & Barrel shows you results for the related “turkey cook”.

3. **REI** (pg. 32)
   
   A search for “Bike carrier” at REI first displays bike carriers, then shows related items such as car-mount bike racks.
We recommend you...

1. Allow people to sort/filter the results by specific product attributes such as brand, price, color, size, etc. If your product is highly specialized (like wine, for example), provide relevant filters (such as grape type, country of origin, vintage, etc.).

2. Allow people to exclude/include results so they can focus on the results most relevant to them. For instance, if you offer several network hubs from a variety of manufacturers, give your customers the option to “show only” those matches for a specific company like Lucent or Cisco.

3. For long results lists, give people the same sorting options at the bottom of the page as you’ve given them at the top. These sorting and filtering mechanisms should be visually identical to reduce confusion. None of the sites we reviewed followed this best practice so we used an example from eBags.com.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. REI (pg. 32)

   ![REI Sorting/Filtering](image)

   REI allows you to sort by brand, price, sale status, and how recently an item was added to the site.

2. CDW (pg. 16)

   ![CDW Sorting/Filtering](image)

   CDW allows you to filter a list by the manufacturers displayed in your search results.

3. eBags (site was not featured in our report)

   ![eBags Sorting/Filtering](image)

   eBags provides the same “Sort By” functionality at the top and bottom of a search results screen. We would have preferred to highlight a site from our report for this best practice, but none of the sites we tested had this feature.
No Results Found
Best practices for providing useful information if no results were found

We recommend you...

1. Be clear that no results were found and display the term that wasn’t found.
The fact that no results were found should be the first thing someone sees – not the last.

2. Show tips/hints to help people expand their search and get results.
Suggest people check their spelling, be more (or less) specific with their search terms, etc.

3. Provide a search box where people can enter a new search without having to return to the previous page.
Don’t force people to find the search box.

4. Provide advanced search options to help people locate the item(s) they want.
If someone can’t find something with the simple search, provide additional options to help them expand or limit their search.

5. Provide links to recent or popular searches conducted by other customers.
There’s a good chance that the most popular searches may be relevant to other visitors.

6. Solicit feedback and listen to your customers.
If an item is consistently searched for, but never found, maybe it’s an item you should consider carrying. Allow your customers to tell you what they were looking for so you can see if it’s something worth selling. We also recommend analyzing your search logs to spot frequently misspelled terms or products you don’t stock.

Examples of the best practices in action

1. Crutchfield

   Crutchfield uses larger type and red text to clearly notify you that a search term wasn’t found.

2. Lands’ End

   Lands’ End provides tips and hints that help explain why nothing was found and how you can improve your search.

3. Red Envelope

   Red Envelope makes it easy to search again by placing a search box directly below the “no items were found” text.

4. PC Mall

   If no results are found, PC Mall presents the customer with advanced search options to help them locate their item(s).

5. Amazon.com

   If no results are found, Amazon.com shows me the top searches in the category that I searched.

6. Drugstore.com

   If you can’t find something on Drugstore.com, they ask you to let them know.
Final Thoughts and Thank You

Wrapping it all up

There are no hard-and-fast rules for building the perfect retail search engine. Nevertheless, one of the best ways to improve is by learning from the successes and failures of other sites.

For instance, when a customer misspells a product name, does it gracefully intuit your meaning like L.L. Bean (pg. 24) or does it fail nearly every time like QVC (pg. 30)? When it comes to mixed specifications, does your site break the query down like Lands' End (pg. 23) or does it take it literally like MotherNature.com (pg. 26)? Does your site behave more like Petco (pg. 28) or more like The Apple Store (pg. 14) when it comes to matching related terms? The difference can make or break the customer experience.

We hope both the good and bad case studies featured in this report will serve as guides, a source of inspiration, and as a toolkit to help you improve your site's search capabilities. Your customers will thank you. Good luck!

Thank you

We’d like to thank you for reading this report. We hope you’ve found it useful - and enlightening. Hopefully it helps you improve your site’s search functionality and experience.

Our goal is to develop and publish the most useful web research reports available. If you have any questions, comments, critiques (good and bad), or suggestions for future report topics, send them to email@37signals.com.

We look forward to hearing from you,

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