

BY PAULA ANDRUSS//FREELANCE WRITER

CONSUMERS DO THE SELLING

ROUTING SITE VISITORS DIRECTLY TO CUSTOMER REVIEWS LED TO HIGHER SALES AT DIAPERS.COM

WHO: Diapers.com, a Montclair, N.J.-based online retailer of baby products such as diapers and baby food as well as car seats, strollers and cribs.

WHAT: To increase organic traffic and drive sales, the retailer incorporated a new search engine optimization (SEO) feature that bypasses a main landing page and instead routes organic search traffic directly to the detailed product page, complete with user-generated product reviews.

Diapers.com is the first company to work with San Francisco-based customer review service provider PowerReviews to implement the search function, which is called In-Line SEO. Two weeks after it was deployed in February 2009, the number of visitors coming to the site's product detail pages from unpaid search results had jumped nearly 49%, and sales increased 33%.

HOW: According to New York-based Jupiter Research, 81% of Internet users use search engines to find the Web sites they're looking for. And roughly 80% of online shoppers use consumer-generated product reviews and ratings to help make their buying decisions. So using SEO to drop shoppers straight onto a product page containing reviews seems only, well, natural.

Darby Williams, vice president of marketing for PowerReviews, says that typically, external content providers such as PowerReviews deliver content to sites using a programming language called JavaScript, but search engines such as Google, Yahoo! and MSN aren't designed to read it, so that content—in this case, the reviews—is essentially invisible to them.

But PowerReviews' new search capability allows Diapers.com to put the content on its pages without JavaScript, so it can be read by the engines like any other content.

"It basically removes a technical impediment and makes people land directly where there is the best chance to convert them," Williams says.

Routing users to that page was desirable for Diapers.com because reviews have long been known as a way to generate natural search traffic, says Josh Himwich, director of e-commerce operations for Diapers.com. Product reviews help increase the keyword density of a page because they tend to include many of the words shoppers use when searching for items online. Reviews also help to boost SEO because they bring in shoppers using detailed search phrases known as long-tail keywords, which typically contain at least three keywords and are very specific to the product or service for which the user is shopping.

For example, Himwich says, including reviews of Pampers diapers helps increase traffic simply because the word "Pampers" is present on the site more than it would be without the reviews. "That helps Google know that this page is really about that product," he says.

Similarly, if a shopper searches Google for "Aden and Anais swaddle reviews," the site shows up sixth in the search rankings—much higher than it would without reviews—and takes users directly to the page containing the upscale blankets.

"The words that people frequently use in reviews are adding to the keyword phrases that generate traffic for us," Himwich says.

In addition to boosting SEO, user reviews also have an impact on conversion rates, Williams says.

"It's fantastic for consumers to be able to get honest feedback right on the product page," he says. "That's what drives conversion; it gives people confidence to buy."

It also keeps them on the site. Jennifer Aaker, professor of marketing at the Stanford Graduate School of Business in Stanford, Calif., adds that online or offline, every step that the consumer has to take is an opportunity for them not to buy, so any step that the marketer makes the consumer take must add value. "Bypassing an intermediate page and bringing them to a product page where they can choose brand, style or size while seeing customer reviews just makes good sense," she says.

To boost the number of reviews on the site, Diapers sends a follow-up e-mail to customers who buy online, encouraging them to send in their thoughts. As an added incentive, each month Diapers offers a gift certificate to a random reviewer who is automatically entered to win upon submitting a review.

It's all part of an effort to garner at least four reviews per product, a number Himwich says is ideal because whatever the shopper's question or concern is, it's usually answered by the fourth review.

"Most of our data shows you get a significant conversion at that point because people feel like there's enough information to feel comfortable enough about making the decision," he says.

To keep reviews authentic, Diapers exerts little control over them. According to Himwich, three-star or higher reviews automatically get put up on the site, and about 99% of the one- or two-star reviews go up as well.

"We give the customers the benefit of the doubt almost every time because we believe it's their voice and it should be authentic," he says. "The only ones that don't get posted are those that are extremely inarticulate or malicious."

Williams says that while retailers may fear that negative reviews could lower sales, PowerReviews' consumer testing has actually shown the opposite: When shoppers see too many good reviews with no negativity mentioned, they don't stop and buy because they don't believe any product is perfect.

"Sometimes listing a con along with the pros ends up making people feel that they've gotten honest feedback, and they're willing to make a decision. That credibility helps increase sales," he says.

Still, giving customers the reins by relying on their reviews to make sales can be somewhat daunting. But Himwich says the increase in traffic makes it worth the risk, and that there are other ways to disseminate the marketing message online, such as layering banner ads onto the product detail page.

"We'd obviously prefer that shoppers truly understand our value proposition and land on a page that would let us do that," he says. "But this is a something-versus-nothing situation. Without this SEO feature, we wouldn't get many of those visitors at all. And I'd rather get 1,000 more visitors to the site every day than zero more." ■

Paula Andrus is a Cincinnati-based freelance writer.



COMPANY	DIAPERS.COM
HEADQUARTERS	MONTCLAIR, N.J.
2007 SALES*	\$35 MILLION
2008 SALES*	\$89 MILLION
E-COMMERCE MARKETING STAFF SIZE	2

*Source: Diapers.com