



America Online

Blast Radius Helps AOL Reinvent the Online Shopping Experience

CASE STUDY

www.instore.com

CHALLENGE

- Create an ecommerce site that will reinvent online comparison shopping for AOL's 30 million customers and 50,000 merchants.

SOLUTION

- Conducted detailed competitive analysis and in-depth customer research before beginning the design process.
- The resulting site offers an innovative customer experience that features an intuitive reimagining of common online shopping tasks like searching for and bookmarking products.

RESULT

- The launch of the site resulted in over 190 media stories and unanimously positive analyst coverage.
- Customers and vendors were quick to embrace AOL Shopping.

America Online's goal has always been to provide consumers with the most convenient and enjoyable online experience possible. When it became clear that their comparison shopping site was in danger of being overtaken by competitors like Yahoo, MSN, and Google, AOL turned to this long-standing mission for inspiration.

After all, it was their knack for creating a truly user-focused online experience that had earned them their 30 million members. With this in mind, AOL embarked on a bold initiative to reinvent online comparison shopping from the ground up—keeping their customers in mind every step of the way.

HOLISTIC APPROACH

In order to accomplish this ambitious goal, AOL decided to seek outside help. They knew they wanted input on multiple fronts—strategic insights, user-friendly design, and superior technology. That's when AOL decided to partner with Blast Radius.

BEYOND THE STATUS QUO

For Blast Radius, the first step was to uncover strategic insights into AOL's business, customers, and their evolution in the network-driven marketplace. This began with a close look at the online comparison shopping industry. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the major sites? And what sort of customer experience were they providing?

It didn't take long to see some major shortcomings. For one, the sheer volume of search results returned by simple queries made it difficult to make any meaningful comparisons. At the same time, features that let customers bookmark an item or add it to a "wish list" were complex and tended to derail the experience by sending customers to a separate page.

What was missing, they found, was any true reflection of the way people actually shop offline. In the physical world, the best shopping experiences happen when merchants take the time to be attentive to people's needs. Why wasn't this happening online?

After validating this insight with sample customer and retail experts, the Blast Radius team realized they had hit on the foundation of their solution.

BUILDING A RAPPORT WITH CUSTOMERS

Pre-production began with a reimagining of the product search interface. After all, when you're searching 25 million products from 50,000 merchants, information overload is a real danger.

Determined to avoid bombarding customers with an overwhelming number of products, the team examined the problem from the shopper's point-of-view. In the end, they decided to focus on emulating one of the best aspects of offline shopping—the experience of browsing with a knowledgeable friend or a helpful salesperson at your side.

The result was Rapport, a unique interface for the Pinpoint Shopping search tool that uses everyday language to help customers narrow and fine-tune search criteria. By suggesting criteria that are meaningful for a particular product, Rapport quickly narrows thousands of products to a handful of relevant ones. For example, shoppers looking for a handbag might be asked about color, style or brand names and find themselves presented with six items that perfectly match their search—within seconds.

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SIMPLE YET SOPHISTICATED

A second major innovation was the Remember It system, which seamlessly emulates three important elements of offline shopping—comparing items, putting them on hold, and adding them to a wishlist that can be shared with friends.

Unlike similar systems on competing sites, Remember It doesn't require you to leave the current page or distract you with unnecessary messages or prompts. Instead, a simple collapsible interface stores remembered items and sits at the top of each page where it can be accessed at any time. The end result is a unique feature that is simultaneously simpler and more sophisticated than competing sites.

EVERYBODY WINS

Of course, shoppers weren't the only ones AOL wanted to satisfy. Their partners—some 50,000 merchants—were also a vital part of the equation.

Fortunately, AOL's strategic customer-focused improvements are also designed to benefit merchants. For example, the Rapport interface allows shoppers to spend more time studying relevant products and less time wading through pages of irrelevant results. For merchants, this translates to higher conversion rates. Similarly, the Remember It option nudges conversion rates even higher by reducing interruptions and encouraging more browsing and longer stays.

A final improvement was a custom content management system that allows merchants to connect with the site from their desktops to update product imagery, copy, and layout directly. The system empowers merchants with a simple, efficient process to keep their content current.

THE IMPACT

The launch of the new site—ultimately dubbed AOL Shopping—was a stellar success. AOL's move to re-claim their position as leaders in interactive commerce by creating an innovative and profitable customer experience garnered over 190 media stories and made the analyst community sit up and take notice. Technology research firm Jupiter Research called it "a great step forward for AOL".

AOL's partners were happy too. Initial demand for ad space based on "sneak peaks" of the new site was through the roof. Major brands and vendors are now clamoring to partner with AOL. Most important of all, customers were quick to embrace AOL Shopping.

NEXT STEPS

Following the successful launch of AOL Shopping, AOL decided to work with Blast Radius to extend this approach to the travel industry. The launch of Pinpoint Travel, AOL's new travel search site, soon followed, creating waves in the web travel landscape.

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About Blast Radius

Blast Radius helps businesses deliver innovative and profitable customer experiences by combining business strategy, experience design, and industry-leading technologies, including its unique content lifecycle management solutions. With offices in the US, Canada and Europe, Blast Radius has formed long-term relationships with companies such as Aeroplan, A&E Television Networks, BMW, Fairmont Hotels & Resorts, Heineken, Nike, Nintendo and Philips.

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