

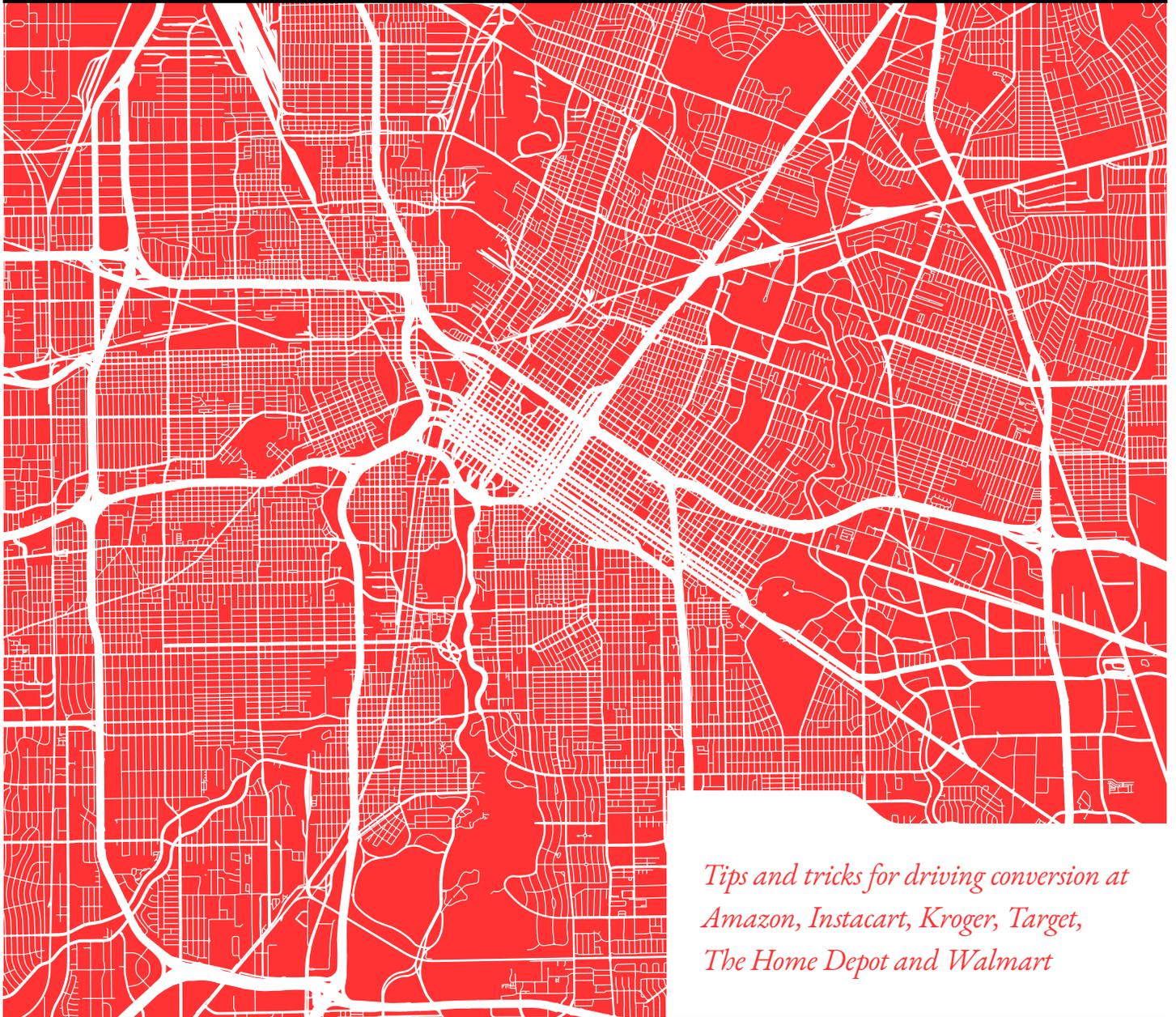


SPECIAL ——— REPORT

THE MARS AGENCY®

Digital Commerce *Roadmap*

A GUIDE TO ECOMMERCE EXCELLENCE AT SIX LEADING RETAILERS



Tips and tricks for driving conversion at Amazon, Instacart, Kroger, Target, The Home Depot and Walmart

The ongoing evolution of ecommerce continues to reshape the way brands are engaging with shoppers.



Marketing organizations are building out the capabilities they need to succeed in the digital ecosystem and aligning their internal functions to make ecommerce an integral piece of their overall marketing strategy.

Keeping pace with digital shoppers is no easy task, as advances in technology and changes in media consumption have expanded shopper conversion well beyond the traditional confines of a dedicated ecommerce website to encompass “any format, any time, any moment,” said Leslie Miller, Chief Digital & Communications Officer for Nutrition and Ice Cream, at a recent industry conference.

Adding even greater complexity to the task is the fact that each leading ecommerce website has its own set of rules and practices that brands must follow not just to win over shoppers, but to stay in compliance with that retailer. “I still have a business that’s focused on specific retailers,” noted Miller, basically speaking for all consumer product marketers.

To help marketers navigate this complexity, The Mars Agency has prepared the following report, which examines the unique digital marketing opportunities in four key strategic across six of the leading ecommerce retailers: Amazon, Instacart, Kroger, Target, The Home Depot and Walmart.

This information illustrates the type of expertise we’re providing to our clients as we help them succeed in the fast-changing ecommerce marketplace.

Winning with ORGANIC SEARCH



At this stage, digital opportunities on retailer platforms have transcended the traditional boundaries of search to encompass a multitude of touch points — and are even bridging the gap with physical stores. Yet organic search still remains the quintessential battleground for brands striving for success in commerce.

Digital shoppers are either searching specifically for your brand or exploring alternatives by typing in broader, general keywords related to your products or your category. The pivotal question that commerce marketers must answer is, “Where does my brand appear in these critical moments?”

And by “critical moments,” we mean the 3 seconds it takes for shoppers to make a purchase decision after getting their search results.

To conquer the organic search landscape, brands must develop a meticulous strategy that accounts for the unique algorithms and content practices used by each key retailer.

The Mars Agency’s ecommerce team is frequently asked questions like, “What distinguishes search on Target.com from Walmart.com?” or “Why does my return on ad spend (ROAS) vary between Instacart and Amazon?”

In this first section, we’ll try to answer questions like those by dissecting the intricacies of organic search on Amazon, Instacart, Kroger, Target, The Home Depot and Walmart, providing clarity on the significant factors shaping the results page for each and the key strategic differences across them.

Amazon



KEY POINTS

In recent years, Amazon has steadily increased the amount of real estate it dedicates to paid advertising on its platform. More recently, the ecommerce giant has been placing a greater emphasis on video.

According to a study from video marketing agency Wyzowl, 69% of Amazon customers prefer learning about a new product or service through video rather than other formats such as text-based articles or infographics. This finding underscores the growing importance of video marketing across the entire ecommerce space.

As Amazon continues to dominate online shopping, it's no surprise that businesses of all sizes are investing heavily in advertising on the platform. With its massive customer base and advanced targeting capabilities, Amazon offers a unique opportunity for brands to reach their audience and drive sales.

It's important to note, however, that while paid advertising is becoming more prevalent on Amazon, organic search remains vital to success. But with more and more businesses vying for the attention of Amazon shoppers, standing out in organic search results can be a challenge.

To optimize your presence and improve your chances of being discovered by shoppers, therefore, it's essential to focus on both organic and paid search. This involves:

- creating high-quality, keyword-rich product listings,
- optimizing your content to satisfy Amazon's search algorithm
- investing in paid advertising to drive targeted traffic to your listings.

Whether you're a small business or a large enterprise, the ultimate key to success on Amazon is staying up to date with the latest trends and best practices. At the moment, focusing on video advertising, optimizing your organic search presence, and leveraging the power of Amazon's massive customer base will help you drive sales, build your brand, and achieve long-term success.

TIPS & TRICKS

1. Optimize the content you're using in descriptions and bullets. Leverage martech tools like the ones offered by Analytic Index to strengthen your keyword research capabilities.
2. Maintain review scores of 4.3 or better for your products, which will make them more likely to maintain an Amazon best seller ranking (BSR) in the long term.
3. Apply a mobile-focused strategy, since an estimated 60% of Amazon's shopping trips take place through the retailer's app. In the Amazon app environment, product images and enhanced content appear before product descriptions and bullet points. Brands, therefore, need to make sure that images and enhanced content are product-centric so they can serve as the visual storyboard needed to persuade shoppers to buy.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- Rating scores
- Average number of times keywords are mentioned in the product title
- Presence of product-centric enhanced content

Instacart



KEY POINTS

The leading online grocery delivery platform, Instacart has enjoyed explosive growth in recent years, making it an important partnership consideration for many brands.

Instacart's search algorithm prioritizes product availability and shopper personalization. According to the company's own data, between 60% and 70% of shoppers use the search function to find the items they want to purchase, with the other 30% to 40% using the platform's browse and discover functions.

Therefore, when a search is conducted, Instacart will prioritize products that are in stock and available for delivery in that shopper's area. This focus on product availability is essential for Instacart's primary value proposition to customers, which is the ability to deliver items precisely when needed.

However, because Instacart doesn't own any product inventory, the purchase journey can be non-linear: a shopper may start by looking for a particular product but end up buying a different one based on what's available at that point in time. So winning on Instacart requires content and SEO strategies that can engage shoppers who often are in discovery mode but also fully intent on making a purchase.

Despite these challenges, some brands are experimenting with virtual bundles on Instacart to influence basket building. By bundling products, brands can create a more compelling experience that encourages shoppers to add more items to the cart.

This strategy can be especially effective when combined with targeted promotions and offers.

Success on Instacart depends on a brand's ability to adapt to the unique challenges presented by the platform. By focusing on product availability and personalization and keeping their marketing plans flexible, brands can build a strong presence and drive sales over the long term. As online grocery shopping continues to grow in popularity, Instacart will remain a key player, and brands that can effectively navigate the platform will be well-positioned for the future.

TIP & TRICKS

1. Product assortment and availability are key.
2. Perfect your product images: even if your product isn't added to the basket initially, Instacart may recommend it elsewhere if your competitor's item is out of stock. So keep the long-term game in mind by always giving shoppers a positive impression.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- Level of sponsored advertising behind product placements
- Product assortment & availability
- Presence of complete product attributes

Kroger



KEY POINTS

The largest grocer in the U.S., Kroger is a household name for 60 million+ customers who rely on the retailer for many of their daily needs thanks to its vast selection of products and services.

Kroger's organic search activity is heavily dominated by non-branded keywords: 85% of searches, in fact, contain generic category or product terms rather than specific brands. This indicates that customers are actively seeking out the items they need, not just stumbling upon them through the advertising they encounter.

While there is no public benchmarking data available, one of The Mars Agency's industry partners has gained a 7% year-over-year sales uplift by adopting effective SEO strategies that focus on winning non-branded keywords. Marketers can use tools from Analytic Index and other solution providers to identify the generic search terms being used by Kroger shoppers, then continuously study the reports to track changes in search behavior and adjust their SEO strategy accordingly.

Investing in organic SEO tactics can also lead to cost savings. By improving their organic search rankings, brands can increase visibility without spending as much on common advertising opportunities like Product Listing Ads (PLA), basket builder, or search and browse placement.

TIPS & TRICKS

1. Compared with other retailers, product images on search results pages in Kroger's mobile app are smaller and can sometimes appear unclear to shoppers. Brands should use optimized hero images that will highlight the product's key features.
2. Based on our experience and analysis, Kroger has designed its search engine to mirror Google's in terms of design, which means data tagging is very important. Make sure all the digital assets you submit have embedded meta-data, tags, or alt text.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- The number of times keywords are mentioned in the product title
- Data tagging and labeling in assets

Target



KEY POINTS

The search algorithm on Target.com was reconfigured recently to prioritize product titles and item data rather than focusing on keyword relevance as in the past. This change has elevated the submission of product attributes from a useful task for helping products appear under different browse menus to a “must do” that’s critical for improving search visibility.

Target has stated previously that copy and bullet points on product detail pages (PDPs) have a low impact on search visibility. But according to A/B tests that we’ve run, the more frequently you repeat short-tail keywords in PDP copy, the higher search visibility you’ll gain. (This “difference of opinion” between our agency and Target might arise from the fact that the retailer’s algorithm considers a wide range of factors to determine search visibility.)

Another factor that Target’s algorithm considers is item popularity, as benchmarked by sales volume. This is a logical approach in terms of the user experience, since high-demand products should be easy for customers to find at the top of search results.

But Target has also set the algorithm to show some preference to new products, to give them an opportunity to realize their potential. This is a good strategy, as it encourages innovation among brands and helps new products gain traction with shoppers in a highly competitive market.

Finally, while Target has not explicitly stated this, it’s clear that the company is favoring products that can deliver higher profit margins. So you should expect to see more popular and higher-margin items performing better than others in searches.

TIPS & TRICKS

1. Both your hero and second product image need to be eye-catching: on a desktop, moving the cursor over an image tile on the search results page will cause the second image to flash. Because of this, many brands are now using a lifestyle image in the second slot to attract shoppers.
2. When possible, include more than one product video. An increasing number of brands are now using one video to introduce the product and another to connect shoppers with the brand.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- Keyword relevance to product attributes and category
- Presence of video on PDPs
- Product profitability (for Target)

The Home Depot



KEY POINTS

According to research conducted by Baymard Institute, search queries for basic product types on HomeDepot.com always return accurate results, but synonym-based or thematic searches are not as precise.

Brands should therefore focus on broad category keywords instead of contextual ones. For example, instead of targeting specific attributes like “stainless steel refrigerator with ice dispenser,” simply go with “refrigerator” or “kitchen appliances.” This approach will increase the likelihood of appearing in search results and reaching a larger audience.

Another important factor to consider here, as elsewhere, is the use of product videos. Although there is no direct correlation between video content and increased search ranking, product videos are known to be highly valued by Home Depot shoppers. These videos can provide a comprehensive overview of the product, along with inspirational context that can help potential buyers make informed decisions.

Similar to Amazon, Home Depot relies on brand-submitted product attributes to build its website menu and comparison charts (the latter of which are algorithm-generated); this is particularly important for appliances that come with accessories sold together as packages. It’s crucial, then, for brands to submit their product attributes accurately and

consistently. This not only will improve their chances of appearing in search results but also enhance the overall user experience for shoppers.

TIPS & TRICKS

1. At maximum zoom, product images on HomeDepot.com are roughly 50% larger than their original size. As a result, low-resolution images can look worse on Home Depot’s digital shelf than elsewhere. Brands therefore must make sure to provide high-resolution images.
2. Product thumbnails are truncated on PDPs; Home Depot can accept up to 9 images, but the PDP thumbnail will only display 5. Of those 5 slots, most brands are employing 2 for videos and 1 for a 360-degree image — making it critical for the first two images to be eye-catching enough to attract clicks.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- Ratings & reviews
- Image count of 5 or more

Walmart



KEY POINTS

While most marketers know that a majority of U.S. shoppers — currently 61% — use Amazon.com to begin their product searches regardless of where they plan to make the purchase, it's less known that Walmart.com has become a general starting point for 32%. (Source: Jungle Scout.)

Walmart has long been known for placing stringent requirements on brands. One of the more significant initiatives in recent years has been the introduction of the Walmart Content Scorecard, which rates a brand's product content (titles, images, review counts, etc.) against predetermined quality standards. The retailer wants products to achieve an overall content rating of 95% or better, with items scoring any lower risking discontinuation.

As Walmart continues to fine-tune the Scorecard standards across different product categories, brands have reported seeing their scores drop by more than 20 points in a single day if a new attribute requirement hasn't been communicated effectively. This can cause significant stress for brands, who may have already invested significant time and resources into meeting the previous requirements.

Interestingly, brands have reported that Walmart merchants appear to be benchmarking against Amazon, perhaps because Amazon is also known for having strict requirements for content and presentation — and has effectively enforced them for many years.

It's important, therefore, to maintain regular communication with your account and category managers to clarify any new requirements that may come along and reduce your score.

TIPS & TRICKS

1. Increase the number of reviews your products have on Walmart.com to capture shoppers who increasingly are proving to be retailer-agnostic. In our ongoing ecommerce audits, we regularly find that the same product will have three to four times more reviews on Amazon.com than on Walmart.com.

Some brands have been told recently that Walmart may soon require all products to maintain a specified number of reviews. For now, we recommend that brands with extensive “long tail” online assortments consider using review syndication tools to boost their numbers. This could potentially spread out the cost of reaching any targets that Walmart might set in the future.

2. Regularly audit the integrity of your content on Walmart.com. Last summer, Walmart's “Project Glass” initiative promised to restore the rich media opportunities that were lost through the merger of the retailer's general merchandise and OPD platforms, but they haven't all returned.

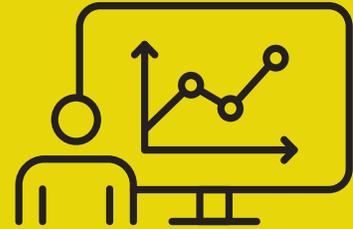
For example, 360-degree spin and video do not seem to be working in all cases, and some brands are struggling to get their below-the-fold content to stick. Regular audits using the right reporting tools will let you effectively monitor your content syndication success.



CRITERIA INFLUENCING SEARCH RANKING:

- Keywords used in the “About this item” section of your PDP and your shelf description
- Brand names correctly submitted as a product attribute

Driving ONSITE TRAFFIC



The next key area of strategic focus is driving quality traffic to these retailer websites — particularly to your own brand pages, product detail pages (PDPs) and custom landing pages. While all of the retailers covered in this report have substantial shopper audiences, it's still important for brands to engage additional consumers elsewhere in the digital ecosystem to influence consideration and purchase.

Unlike search, which is focused almost entirely on keywords, your efforts to drive quality traffic can leverage both retailer DSPs (demand side platforms) and third-party sources to create the custom audiences you'll need.

For this purpose, it doesn't matter if your target audience isn't searching for your product at the moment because you'll be creating your own demand, potentially re-target consumers, and testing any preconceived notions you might have about who your shopper is.

Consumers are increasingly interconnected, more knowledgeable, less inclined toward brand loyalty, and definitely open to various shopping channels. The path to purchase that they take isn't a simple, direct route; there are numerous twists and turns as they progress from one touch point to another in their journey.

What's more, shoppers seek different types of content and information in different stages of this journey. Consequently, optimizing for one single characteristic of a search engine results page (SERP) will no longer get the job done.

The CPG shopper journey



Source: Circana (formerly IRI)

As illustrated in this graphic from Circana (formerly IRI), a comprehensive shopper journey can now span multiple digital and physical channels and touch points. That requires brands to get very strategic about their connected commerce strategies overall and the role that driving traffic to retailer websites will play: How often is your target audience online? Which social platforms do they frequent? How receptive are they to other types of media? These are some of the questions you'll need to answer.

It should already be obvious that there isn't any one-size-fits-all solution for brands. The ability to search and shop for products across any channel — anytime and anywhere — has dramatically altered their relationship with shoppers. According to Forrester, more than 70% of retail sales will be digitally influenced by 2027, which makes it even more critical for brands to develop a holistic understanding of shopper behavior so they can deliver the relevant content needed to connect all those touch points in the purchase journey.

Amazon

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Halfway through 2023, we were still seeing Amazon's A10 algorithm (which determines organic search rankings) placing an emphasis on external traffic. While brands in the past could be "rewarded" even if the traffic didn't drive purchase, this is no longer the case. The A10 algorithm now strongly favors searches and listings that will deliver a purchase.

UPS on-demand fulfillment subsidiary Ware2Go argues that A10 now places greater emphasis on click-through rates and conversions because many shoppers begin their product searches on Amazon but end up buying on rival platforms like Walmart.com or Target.com. And these competitors are owning more placements in Google search results than Amazon. So by emphasizing external traffic in A10, Amazon's other end goal is to increase its own Google search rankings.

According to an Amazon report published in February, 41% of the retailer's total sales traffic comes from offsite search channels. Of that traffic, 44% is coming from social media channels when shoppers are in product or brand discovery mode.

Another important traffic (not to mention sales) driver is email. Out of all offsite sources, email has the highest conversion rate when brands include tailor messages and call-to-action, according to the report.

By understanding Amazon's A10 design and traffic composition, Amazon sellers can take the appropriate action. We recommend diversifying your marketing strategy with the right media mix model — in partic-

ular, using DSP ads, social media and email to drive traffic to Amazon. Leveraging influencers is another crucial tool that should be leveraged.

While Amazon PPC (pay per click) ads remain important, not all types are created equal. In fact, Amazon itself has noted that brands worldwide using the Sponsored Brands video ad format generate 43% more purchases from new-to-brand customers than those that don't.

FAST FACT:

Amazon's massive ecommerce success stems partly from its efficient supply chain: Although its U.S. digital sales are 10 times greater than Walmart's and 20 times more than Target's, its fulfillment center square footage is only 3 times greater than Walmart's and 8 times more than Target's, according to Supply Chain Dive/Max Garland.



QUICK TIPS:

- Make sure that your products are ranking in national media search terms to take full advantage of your full-funnel media strategy — in our experience, this is even more important for sellers on Amazon Europe.
- It's also crucial to personalize the Amazon shopping experience, which includes adjusting product listings to match customer preferences. By blending data-driven marketing with a touch of personalization, brands can stand out and perform better on Amazon.

Instacart

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Instacart has steadily grown into a mature advertising platform. In fact, Cleveland Research Company (CRC) recently noted that the last-mile delivery service is now looking for more brands to commit to a joint business plan that includes an advertising budget. Therefore, it's time to consider investments that will drive traffic to your Instacart product listings.

In light of the current inflationary pressures on consumer spending, coupons have been an effective tool for generating incremental spend on the platform, according to brands with which we work. But they tend to drive the most-impressive results when combining a coupon program with paid search.

Elsewhere, Instacart now has an affiliate network called Instacart Tastemakers that lets creators, publishers and developers monetize the purchases their audiences make on the platform. This program is also driving increased traffic to grocery item listings.

FAST FACT:

According to 1010data, Instacart's top five retailers — Publix, Costco, Aldi, Kroger and Wegmans — account for more than 50% of total sales. But Food Lion, ShopRite, Meijer and Walmart have made substantial share gains over the last two years, along with Publix, Costco and Aldi; these 7 retailers have increased their share of the Instacart universe by more than 10%.



QUICK TIP:

To capture the most value, Instacart recommends starting with a minimum daily ad budget of \$20 to ensure your campaign will generate the necessary traffic to let the algorithm optimize for sales and other key KPIs. Campaigns with a daily budget greater than \$100 will optimize faster, thereby driving more sales.

Kroger

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

With its longstanding brand loyalty program, Kroger can tie 96% of its sales to specific households. Kroger's retail media arm, Kroger Precision Marketing (or KPM), is leveraging this robust first-party data, combined with customer profiles, to make localized advertising more effective.

Meanwhile, Kroger's private marketplace (PMP) is an open programmatic program that gives brands promising opportunities to drive traffic to the websites of the grocer's many banners (although it doesn't allow tags from the demand-side platforms of rivals like Amazon and Walmart).

Kroger hasn't stopped there. This May, the retailer rolled out smart screens to 500 stores under a three-year pilot program with digital merchandising platform Cooler Screens. Kroger believes this in-store experience will give shoppers targeted, relevant ad messages to help them make better purchase decisions.

For brands, this development means they'll be able to drive traffic to online PDPs from cooler screens in addition to mobile phones. For Kroger, digital commerce researcher Stratably predicts that digital profitability will improve when platform-agnostic media buys will be able to drive both digital and in-store sales.

These are opportunities that brands should definitely seek to leverage.

FAST FACT:

Like Amazon, Kroger also has a proprietary clean room solution called the 84.51° Collaborative Cloud. The tool provides access to clean, unaggregated, de-identified transaction-level data for Kroger's 60 million loyalty program households in a privacy-compliant environment. The rich data includes in-store, pickup and delivery transactions. Brands should explore how this can provide clearer business visibility to their activity with Kroger.



QUICK TIP:

Kroger takes an in-house approach to programmatic, so make sure your search, media, and data analytics teams have the right processes in place and the proper expectations in mind when collaborating with the retailer.

Target



KEY CONSIDERATIONS

To some advertisers, Target’s Roundel retail media platform represents one of the more dynamic solutions currently available because of its accessibility for third-party programmatic, partnership with Index Exchange as a supply side platform (SSP) and use of Criteo and CitrusAd on the demand side.

Similar to Kroger, Target is looking to use Roundel as a bridge to make seamless connections between digital operations and physical stores. The goal isn’t to simply sell ad space to brands, but to craft ways of getting shoppers to buy more — and more often — at Target, on Target.com, and through the Target Circle app. (Although the retailer hasn’t made any official comment, it has hinted that the Target Circle loyalty program will be a focus going forward.)

The mission to drive quality traffic to Target.com, therefore, can’t single out the digital experience from physical stores. As covered in our report from Target’s annual Marketing Partner Summit, one-third of customers are making purchases in-store and via digital channels in the same week.

Brands should partner with Roundel to find new ways of bringing the shopper experience to life by leaning into the “One Target” approach and taking advantage of more inventory, more search opportunities, and deeper connections into the entire organization.

FAST FACT:

In 2023, Target’s business “underperforms” in sales compared with Walmart, according to Stratably, which attributes the disparity in part to the difference in their category mixes: grocery accounts for 80% of sales on Walmart.com but just 60% on Target.com. This more-diverse portfolio mix means that Target’s “underperformance” may not provide a good framework for predicting the performance of non-grocery categories (like health & beauty).



QUICK TIP:

Word across the industry suggests that, although it’s not a huge priority yet, Target is looking to expand the number of product categories and suppliers represented on Target+, its curated third-party marketplace. If you’re a digitally native DTC brand, work on your omnichannel presence to foster a stronger working relationship with Target’s merchandising team.

The Home Depot

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The Home Depot's life as a media company started in 2019 with the launch of Home Depot Retail Media+, which lets brands place ads on a variety of company-owned properties including homedepot.com, the mobile app, offsite social, video media channels and even the in-store flyer.

In contrast to other retail channels, the path to purchase and conversion time in home improvement can be significantly longer because shoppers want to fully research their project before making a purchase. Since the consideration phase of the shopper journey is longer, brands should keep in mind that driving "quality" traffic to HomeDepot.com in this context involves shoppers look to be educated first, and then persuaded to buy.

According to CRC, using Google SEO as a source for external traffic to HomeDepot.com yields the strongest ROI, especially when used to support Retail Media+ campaigns. A small percentage of brands have also seen promising results from offsite display ads and email campaigns employing embedded sponsored tiles.

Since most Home Depot shoppers have a specific project in mind when researching products that will best suit their needs, video ads work extremely well

in driving traffic. Because of this, some brands have also invested in YouTube and Connected TV ads.

As usual, presenting the right message, on the right channel, in the right medium, and at the right time will be essential to winning.

FAST FACT:

A specialty retailer operating in three countries (U.S., Canada and Mexico), The Home Depot has 2,322 stores and 198 million customers. TheHomeDepot.com enjoys 3.6 billion annual visits; about 55% of online orders, however, are still fulfilled in physical stores.



QUICK TIP:

As noted earlier, The Home Depot has a very high percentage of customers with a hands-on project in mind who start shopping online but end up in the store. TheHomeDepot.com, therefore, is all about connecting the shopper journey to enable a seamless experience between the two environments. The retailer itself runs a retargeting program that lets brands reach out to consumers who've visited their HomeDepot.com product pages with ads on social media and other off-site channels.

Walmart

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Walmart has been very busy the last few years. In addition to building up fulfillment services, it has expanded the Walmart Connect advertising platform significantly and doubled down on its marketplace.

Compared with Amazon.com, Walmart.com doesn't carry as many ads; one recent Profitero study found the difference on the first page of search results to be roughly half. However, Walmart gives brands more control over ad placement. If you don't want any ads to appear on the Buy Box, for instance, that can be excluded.

Meanwhile, Walmart appears to be competing against both Amazon and Target for Google search placement, since Walmart recognizes that Google represents the starting point for many shopper journeys.

This is where search ties into digital shelf optimization: Walmart pays for products to appear in national search engines, but will only do so for items that satisfy all their product listing requirements. Therefore, to drive more traffic to your Walmart listings, make sure the content on your PDPs and brand stores are meeting all the retailer's requirements.

Another proven traffic-driver for Walmart.com is coupons and rebates: the site derives nearly 13% of its referral traffic from coupons and rebates, according to Similarweb. That makes third-party coupon solutions such as MikMak — which also identifies Walmart.com as among its more popular checkout points — an effective method for driving shoppers to the site.

Meanwhile, Walmart is attempting to monetize its shopper data by selling its Luminate analytics platform as a single source of truth across the retailer's physical and digital sales channels.

FAST FACT:

Walmart's U.S. ecommerce sales grew by 12% to \$53 billion in fiscal 2023. Globally, the business has doubled in size over the last four years and now totals \$82 billion, or 13% of total revenue.



QUICK TIP:

If you haven't been using social media to drive traffic to Walmart.com, now is the time to act because the site is gaining an increasing amount of referral traffic from these platforms. According to Similarweb, 34% of these social referrals come from YouTube and 24% from Facebook. And while it might surprise you, the third-greatest share comes from Reddit.



Winning with RATINGS & REVIEWS



Today's digitally focused shoppers rely heavily on product reviews from their peers to make informed purchase decisions.

User generated content (UGC) provider Bazaarvoice has conducted research with shoppers to help brands better understand how much they value ratings and reviews to guide them through all stages of the buying process.

Retailers already understand this. They have plenty of data proving how both the quality and quantity of product reviews can significantly improve conversion rates among their shoppers.

Securing reviews for your new products, therefore, is standard practice for any launch plan — as is supporting products with low review counts on a frequent basis and consistently refreshing the review libraries of your top sellers. And there are plenty of resources available to help brands make this happen.

In addition to third-party review platforms like Bazaarvoice and PowerReviews, most retailers have their own programs for driving product trial and reviews. In this article, we'll look at strategies for the ratings and reviews at six leading retailers to help brands understand how best to optimize their activity on each platform.

Amazon



For many consumers, Amazon has become a go-to destination for pre-shopping product research. Reading reviews on Amazon is an important step toward making purchase decisions — regardless of where they end up buying the product. A recent Cleveland Research Company study found that nearly 60% of Amazon shoppers consider rating and reviews to be a key feature of the retailer’s Product Display Page (PDP).

Brand and product managers have known this for a long time, but the typically low response rate to emails requesting post-purchase reviews — 1% to 2% — is a common challenge. To address this, many managers have turned to automation tools to increase the number of review requests sent out in hopes of increasing the response. While this approach may yield more reviews, it doesn’t speak to their quality or authenticity.

It’s worth noting that the review section on Amazon is now titled, “Top reviews from [insert Country here].” These “top” reviews are determined by Amazon’s standards and, unlike their previous practice, may not reflect the most recent opinions provided by customers. Instead, they typically are reviews that received the highest number of “helpful” votes, and they often include photos or videos. So if you don’t get a response when asking customers to leave a review, encourage them to vote for helpful positive reviews is also another option.

Amazon has its own program called Vine that can also help brands solicit authentic reviews. The invitation-only program selects the most insightful reviewers in the Amazon store to serve as “Vine Voices.” Amazon ships them products to them at no cost to get their honest, unbiased opinions.

This year, Vine is available free to brand-registered third-party (3P) marketplace sellers, although first-party (1P) sellers must pay a fee to join. However, participation in the program does not guarantee that product recipients will leave reviews. What’s more, some participating marketers feel that Vine members may tend to be more critical — possibly because they now perceive leaving reviews as being their “job.” And the last thing a brand wants is to pay for negative reviews.

Monitoring negative feedback is essential, and brand managers should report to Amazon any bad reviews related to the retailer’s own logistical issues. By reporting these reviews quickly, steps can be taken to remove them from the product page and prevent them from impacting future shopper perception.

For brands selling products on Amazon in multiple countries, it’s crucial for brand managers to maintain regular communication with regional teams to monitor negative reviews across markets, since Amazon is now cross-posting reviews from different regions. This will help identify and address potential issues and minimize negative shopper experiences.

One final note: Amazon removed the functionality that let brands reply directly to negative reviews back in 2020 and has long required all brand communications to route through their messaging tool; providing direct phone numbers or email addresses to facilitate follow-up conversations is prohibited — because, to Amazon, the shopper is their customer.

Overall, understanding the significance of reviews, leveraging programs like Vine effectively, and staying proactive in managing feedback can help marketers build a positive brand image and improve the shopping experience for Amazon customers.

Instacart

Following in the footsteps of other retailer websites, Instacart now also presents product reviews and ratings on its platform.

Instacart's process for review integration operates in the same way as other PDP content syndication. If you sell products on Instacart but haven't taken the initiative to directly upload content, all PDP content — including reviews — is sourced from the websites of the delivery service's retailer partners.

So if you don't have a workflow for direct content syndication to Instacart, maintaining positive product reviews on each retailer's website becomes even more essential. But when a brand works directly with Instacart, the uploaded content will override the retailer.com content and reviews aren't automatically syndicated from retailer.com sites.

In this situation, we recommend that brands create content directly for Instacart if possible. Most big box retailers have their own distinct fulfillment and delivery services and might, therefore, generate reviews unrelated to Instacart. It's therefore beneficial for brands to capitalize on Instacart's capabilities by providing unique content tailored to the mindset of on-demand shoppers, for whom the most important aspects are product availability, content completeness, and price.

Kroger

Kroger takes a unique approach to product reviews. Unlike other platforms, Kroger doesn't let customers post reviews on any of the websites in its 22-banner chain portfolio. But that doesn't mean that reviews are absent from the ecosystem; instead, Kroger collects reviews from various external sources to provide customers with this valuable information — and brands can get involved directly.

That's because one of Kroger's review sources is a brand's own website. By curating a collection of customer testimonials and positive feedback, brands can provide Kroger with a reliable and controlled source of positive reviews that will help guide the purchase decisions of customers conducting searches.

Additionally, brands can utilize 3P review syndication tools such as Bazaarvoice and its sister company, Influenster. Most of these tools are supported by a service provider that sends out product samples to collect reviews on behalf of brands. Their functionality then lets brands distribute the resulting reviews to various platforms, including Kroger. By leveraging these syndication tools, brands can ensure that positive reviews will reach a broader audience. This approach not only enhances brand visibility, but also helps build trust and credibility among potential customers.



Target

Between 2% and 5% of Target's online purchases generate organic reviews, which is slightly higher than other retailers. So if you're struggling to get reviews, Target could be a good place to focus some of your solicitation resources.

Target also has actively set up its website to answer the current demand among shoppers for UGC, and photos and videos from product reviews are an important element of that. Bazaarvoice (which is one of Target's review syndication partners), found that over half of shoppers prefer a mix of UGC and professional photography on PDPs to assist them in evaluating new products. In fact, 80% of consumers now consider user-generated photos to be more valuable than brand-provided content — a remarkable increase from 44% who made that claim in 2016, according to PowerReviews, another Target syndication partner.

Target has responded, and currently is the only retailer that places customer-supplied review photos right alongside brand-provided imagery. This move underscores the growing influence of authentic consumer experiences and visuals on purchase decisions.

But remember that consumer appreciation for user-generated photos and videos can vary across product categories. PowerReviews finds that UGC is most important in categories like appliances (for 63% of consumers), home and garden (62%), and health & beauty (60%). Brands in these categories should always encourage their shoppers to include photos or videos in the reviews they write on Target.com.

By embracing the authenticity and value that UGC provides, Target can enhance the overall shopping journey for their customers. Incorporating UGC in a strategic, moderated manner will enable the retailer to build trust, foster engagement, and empower shoppers to make more confident, informed purchase decisions.



The Home Depot

Ratings and reviews play an especially vital role in shaping customer perception and influencing purchase decisions in the realm of machinery and tools at The Home Depot. McKinsey has found that consumers are more discerning when buying durables and therefore less likely to consider products with low ratings. The higher costs — not to mention potential risks — associated with making poor choices in these categories inspire customers to prioritize highly rated options.

According to Cleveland Research Company, DIY project shoppers scour product reviews everywhere: 54% on Google, 49% on Amazon, and 41% on HomeDepot.com. For your brand to stand out at this retailer, you'll need to keep tabs on reviews across these and other sources.

Home Depot lets shoppers freely write reviews about the products they purchase. Although Amazon has removed the functionality that let brands reply to negative reviews, Home Depot still allows it, even letting brands leave contact numbers for follow-up conversations. On HomeDepot.com, therefore, it's worthwhile and important to constantly monitor negative reviews and reply in a timely manner.

The retailer also has its own Home Depot Reviewer Program, in which enlisted customers are given 60 days to review products they've been sent. Participants are compensated with a small incentive (often a gift card). For now, Home Depot is selecting the products featured in the program. So if you would like to participate more frequently, consider having a conversation with your Home Depot Brand Advocate to see how your brand might be able to gain additional opportunities.



Walmart

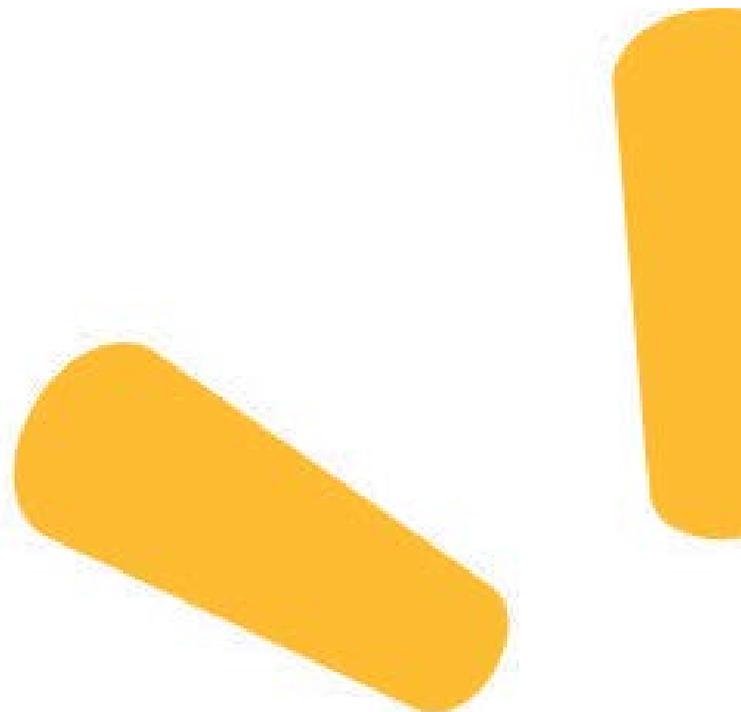


Walmart continues striving to increase its ecommerce market share and recognizes the impact of reviews on conversion. The retailer encourages brands to accumulate a minimum of 20 reviews for their products to enhance appeal and credibility.

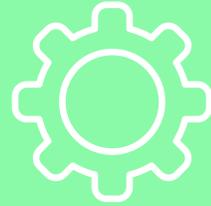
Research from advertising solution provider Pacvue has found that sales and conversion rates begin to plateau once a product reaches 21 reviews. So the optimal time to initiate ad support for a product is after it has amassed 21 reviews. At this stage, the product has garnered sufficient social credibility through the reviews, which will increase its appeal to potential customers. So strategically timing the ad support will allow brands to capitalize on the combined influence of reviews and advertising.

Another important consideration when working with Walmart is the Listing Quality Score it devises (using algorithms) for all PDPs and shares with brands. Depending on the geographic market, ratings and reviews can have a weight of 8% to 10% of your total score. So make sure you solicit enough reviews for your products to achieve a higher content score.

From our experience, having the best possible content score is an ideal way for brands to gain greater partnership support and more test & learn opportunities on Walmart.com.



Optimizing THE DIGITAL SHELF



The last topic is one that's finally gaining dedicated resources from an increasing number of brands: optimizing the digital shelf. While the prior subjects — organic search, traffic driving and ratings & reviews, are all critically important, the digital shelf provides the bedrock for success as the final check point on the path to purchase.

One of the simplest but often overlooked aspects of running a successful ecommerce business is to “walk the store” for your brand and product category: capturing screen shots of what competitors are doing with their PDPs (product detail pages) and regularly tracking how often they update their brand stores to understand how you're stacking up against best-in-class strategies.

Through our work with ecommerce leaders around the globe, it's evident that optimizing the digital shelf by bringing content to life in various formats involves two important elements: messaging creativity on the brand's part, and technological maturity on the retailer's part.

Retailers recognize this fact, too, and have started to publish digital shelf or content scorecards for their brand partners — although few to date have reached the level of maturity needed to grade content quality.

Optimizing the digital shelf, therefore, demands a blend of art and science — a choreography requiring brands to cater to shopper preferences while simultaneously meeting the criteria of retailer search algorithms designed to provide the most pertinent results.

But the effort is well worth it, because a well-executed digital shelf can dramatically improve conversion rates, culminating in increased sales for the brand and accolades for the ecommerce team.

Here is a rundown of tips and tricks for optimizing your shelf at our six leading retailers.

Amazon

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Historically, Amazon has steadily rolled out new content capabilities on an annual basis, tools like from Amazon Live livestream shopping to Amazon Posts image-driven mobile experiences to the Brand Story carousel modules. We expect Amazon to continue expanding with these kinds of unique content features each year. This will create new opportunities for brands to quickly test & learn to determine what is and isn't working.

Note that Amazon typically rolls out these features first in the U.S. or UK, so the teams responsible for those two markets should play a key role in sharing their learnings globally when new content opportunities become available.

In general, Amazon is heavily focused on conversion. On your PDPs, bullet points are especially important for driving conversion. You also should leverage your brand store for cross-selling across the product family, brand storytelling, and promoting tentpole events. Strategically speaking, ecommerce teams should think of the Amazon brand store as having the same goals as a multi-product display in a brick-and-mortar store.

CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: 125 characters in length, with the most relevant search term mentioned 1 time.

IMAGE COUNT: At least 7, but most brands use 9 images or more to tell a more complete product story.

VIDEO: At least 1 video above-the-fold on the PDP: 69% of Amazon customers said they prefer learning about new products or services through video versus other media types like text-based articles or infographics, according to a Wyzowl study.

A+ CONTENT: This has become a must-have, and ideally should be product-centric rather than brand-focused. Premium A+ content is becoming more widely used by brands because it delivers stronger shopper engagement and a better mobile experience.

Remember that the order of content viewed by shoppers is different on Amazon's desktop website vs. the Amazon app. On the latter, A+ content comes before product descriptions and bullets, which is why product-focused enhanced content will drive higher conversion.

STAR RATINGS: On average, products with review scores of 4.3 and above are better able to maintain a best seller ranking (BSR). The best-performing products typically have 4.6 stars or higher.

Instacart

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

As previously discussed, Instacart obtains most of its product content from partnering retailers because many brands haven't yet taken the initiative to create and provide content directly to the on-demand delivery giant's product library — although they should, as we recommended earlier).

As with other on-demand platforms, Instacart lets shoppers make purchases straight from search results by automatically including an add-to-cart button on results tiles. Shoppers subsequently can skip the step of reviewing product details entirely and make results-based purchase decisions. Therefore, mobile-optimized hero images, or optimized images with text strips conveying key details (product type, pack size and/or unit count), will work very well on Instacart.



CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: Titles on Instacart are auto-generated, so make sure your product attributes are submitted correctly. If you are syndicating content, make sure titles are in the correct case because Instacart doesn't change anything before publishing the content. Also, product titles truncate to approximately 50 characters in search results, so make sure you convey all the key information in that early window.

IMAGES: Set a regular cadence for auditing your syndicated content — it's commonplace to find duplicate product images on Instacart. Make sure to use images that help convince shoppers to buy: several different angles of the same glass bottle, for instance, don't do that.

OTHER TIPS: Instacart's product listings carry buttons for various product colors and flavors, which works very well in some categories, such as snacks and confectionery. So make sure to submit your color and flavor attributes.

Kroger

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Unlike other retailers, Kroger does not accept videos and other forms of enhanced content on any of its banner websites (now that Harris Teeter has adopted the unified look used elsewhere). Therefore, optimizing the digital shelf at Kroger is all about getting the basics right.

Kroger's organic algorithm is heavily weighted to products with strong titles, so maintaining precision with search terms in the title matters a lot (even though, from a retail media perspective, Kroger sponsorships don't run on keyword bidding). The retailer uses a default store to present search results, so inventory availability also plays a role.

CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: There is a 100-character limit, but titles can truncate to just 70 characters on mobile phones. So make sure key to convey all product information in that window.

IMAGE COUNT: Use 2 images at the very least, but most top-performing brands use the maximum 6 allowed. The use of accolades and award images varies by category, so ask your account manager or merchandiser about what's allowed there.

VISUAL ASSETS: Kroger's algorithm crawls alt-text within creative assets, so add product names and even contextual keywords to the image/asset name and alt-text fields to maximize shopper value. (If you're unsure what alt text has been entered for your assets, you can find out by going to Kroger.com and reading the image's HTML code.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION: Use 1-3 sentences in a short paragraph of 80 to 100 words for a product description that is unique to Kroger. Repeat the product title within the description.



Target

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Like Kroger, Target uses a nearby store as the default when displaying search results, even if the shopper is using incognito mode. That means different results will appear if the store is changed — which makes optimizing the digital shelf to win share of voice extremely important.

Target has a standardized icon system to help guests easily find and identify the wellness product attributes most important to them. Auto-generated based on submitted product attributes and placed in eye-catching spots on PDPs, these icons are very impactful in driving sales. So be sure to submit all product attributes correctly.

CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: 150 characters is the maximum length, with the most relevant search term mentioned 1 time.

IMAGE COUNT: Use at least 5 images without any text overlays. On desktops, the second image is what appears when shoppers hover their arrow over the product tile on search results pages, so make sure that is a good; some best-in-class examples include lifestyle imagery or an angled product shot that resembles the package being flipped.

PRODUCT COPY: Copy with 6 bullet points is ideal, although some brands go to 8. Use no more than 100 words per bullet.

VIDEO: Target requires at least 1. The video must be closed captioned, with a converting thumbnail image that attracts clicks and increases viewership.

AVERAGE STAR RATING: 4.0 or higher.



The Home Depot

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The Home Depot's search algorithm is highly related to three pieces of the PDP: number of reviews, rating, and number of images.

Although the algorithm isn't directly related to product title length, keyword quality within the product title matters a lot. Short-tail category keywords work best, since Home Depot's search engine is configured better for delivering results with short-tail keywords ("faucet," "bathroom vanity") than long-tail, contextual keywords ("faucet in silver," "bathroom vanity with 3 drawers").

CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: The ideal length is 70-80 characters, with the most important keyword mentioned at least once.

PRODUCT COPY: Use at least 3 complete sentences but a maximum of 1,500 characters. Include the product name in the first sentence, then state the product features, and finally list the specific benefit or value to the customer.

IMAGE COUNT: Using at least 6 images will improve search visibility, but most winning products have 8 or 9 images. Lifestyle images are expected.

VIDEO: At least 1 of your image spots should be devoted to a product video or a 360-degree image.

RATINGS: Achieve 4.3 stars at a minimum but aim for 4.6. When undertaking DIY projects, Home Depot shoppers tend to have higher expectations and far less tolerant of lower-rated products.



Walmart

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Walmart updates its digital shelf requirements more often than any other retailer, and the specifications vary slightly across product categories. The most important strategy for brands, then, is to work closely with your account manager or merchandiser to stay on top of the information.

Walmart's algorithm is heavily weighted to the number of images and reviews on the page. In general, however, we're still seeing products carrying far more reviews on Amazon. But we think it's critical for brands to adopt the right strategy for soliciting more reviews on Walmart.com.

CONTENT GUIDELINES

PRODUCT TITLE: Walmart accepts up to 200 characters on product setup forms, but only about 70 will show up on the website's desktop version and just 40-50 on the retailer's app. So make sure your Walmart product titles are succinct.

IMAGE COUNT: Although Walmart says there is no limit to the number images a brand can upload for a product, and some categories want brands to use as many as 18, we find that pages with 10 are the most effective at converting.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTION: Walmart allows 80 characters max per bullet point, and up to 4,000 characters in total for all content (title, bullets, shelf description, short and long description). Use 3-10 bullets to highly product features, and always use short phrases or keywords.

REVIEWS: Requires a minimum of 100 ratings & reviews. Number of reviews meeting the benchmark is counted towards in the Walmart content health score.

The Mars Agency's Ecommerce team knows that succeeding through online marketplaces requires quality content, winning the search algorithm, and a whole lot more. Our experts take clients to a new level of success by providing end-to-end business management, including operations, advertising, and digital shelf optimization. Using the agency's proprietary data platform, our Digital Shelf Shop creates, enhances, and optimizes client activity across the ecommerce landscape, helping them beat the competition and convert shoppers.

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