

E-business Web Site Evaluation

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Web address: <http://www.perfumedistributor.com>

Overview

Perfume Distributor is a purveyor of fragrances and body care products. Their physical offices are located in Manhattan, at 1548 2nd Avenue. Orders are taken online, by phone, and by fax from individuals and organizations. Businesses are also offered assistance with incentive and company gift programs.

Perfume Distributor uses the electronic store model of B2C e-commerce, although they also act as a wholesale distributor to smaller retailers. It appears that their main sales operations are with end consumers. Their profit appears to be derived from markup and shipping fees. Perfume Distributor claims to be able to beat any other online store's price on fragrances, because of the volume in which they purchase.

General Impressions

I was first lead to this site from a search on Yahoo. Although I have used Yahoo Shopping to find online merchants before, many of the sites to which it has lead me have been disappointments. At first I was skeptical of the site, but as soon as the search tool returned many of the products for which I was looking, I knew this was going to be a good online shopping experience.

The search tool, located in the left menu bar, provides several methods by which one can search. There is a keyword search, a brand and price search from drop down boxes, and an alphabetic search by the first letter of each brand, aggregated by men's and women's fragrances. All three search methods work well, with the keyword search working best and returning a focused list of products. A click on a product brings you directly to a product description page, with a listing of all related products from the same line. The product descriptions were bare and could use some help. Up to the minute stock and pricing information is provided right on the product description page, along with stock and pricing information for the related products.

The transaction forms move along quickly and effortlessly, so long as you have a Yahoo wallet already established. If not, it will take the user a few more forms to establish a Yahoo wallet. I already had one set up, so was immediately whisked off to the shipping page, where I could enter alternate shipping information, get an estimated ship time, and figure the shipping charge. Unfortunately, there is no option for express shipping, and UPS ground is the only option. The plus is that shipping is a flat fee, regardless of how many items are ordered. Credit cards are accepted online, and so is Paypal, at least according to the home page, however I could not find Paypal as a payment option during the transaction. Once a transaction is processed, a confirmation email is sent immediately to the customer's default email address listed in the customer's Yahoo wallet.

I was very impressed with the depth of Perfume Distributor's product line. They claim to have over 10,000 items, and they had the item that I could not find in retail stores, and for a very good price compared to what I paid the last time I bought it. We'll see if their shipping estimate is good or not, as I should be receiving my purchase by the date on which this assignment is due.

The site appears to achieve Perfume Distributor's business goal. It surely does a good job of letting consumers know how big of a selection they have and the low prices that are offered. I can only assume that they do a fair amount of business as a wholesale distributor as well.

Suggestions for Improvement

Yahoo hosts the site in their electronic shopping mall, and so shoppers are required to have a Yahoo ID and wallet if they wish to purchase from Perfume Distributor. Although I am not privy to the financial abilities of the company, I would recommend that they begin hosting their site away from Yahoo, using a shopping cart and payment technology of their choosing. There are people who might object to having their personal and financial details stored by a company like Yahoo that might be apt to sell their personal information. Using Yahoo as a portal may create a barrier to the growth of Perfume Distributor's customer base.

As for the site content, I would suggest that a little more effort be put into the individual product descriptions. They were often short and non-descript, and more detailed descriptions may draw in more buyers. The product picture zoom also does not function well, with the same size picture often being displayed as a zoomed-in version. Technology that doesn't work affects customer's perception of a company's ability to carry out its promises, which in turn affects how much trust customers invest in the company.

According to the homepage, shipping is offered through USPS, UPS, and FedEx. Only, when one places an order, the only option available is UPS ground. Either the banners on the homepage should be removed, or the options made available. Also, it would be an excellent idea to make expedited shipping options available. Payment by Paypal was offered on the homepage, and this also was unavailable on the payment options screen. Either the Paypal banner should be removed, or Paypal should be made available as a payment method during checkout. If a business can't follow through on its promises, it is less predictable and less reliable in the minds of its customers. Promising things are available and then having those things not be available affects the level of trust customers are willing to invest in the company, which in turn affects their willingness to shop with the merchant.

Evaluation

	Rating Comments	
Performance and Usability		
Does the site load quickly and completely with a standard dial-up modem?	6	I have not been able to actually try it on a dial-up connection, but this assessment is based on the speed it downloaded on two DSL lines, one at 1.2Mb and one at 800Kb.
If the site requires the user to have a special plug-in or application (i.e. Flash, Acrobat files) does the site provide a link or help for installing the plug-in?		N/A No plug-ins required.
Is the home page well organized and easy to read and understand?	8	Homepage organized in the usual right and then down pattern, following normal eye pattern.
Are navigation choices clear and logical? Are they consistent and available on every page?	8	Breadcrumbs provided, uniform header, footer, and menu bars throughout
Is information organized in a logical and meaningful fashion? Can you find what you are looking for within three clicks?	7	Generally, most things can be found easily, but some things require hunting
If a search engine is included in the site, does it provide quick, concise, and accurate results?	9	Results are concise, accurate, and ordered by precedence.
If no search engine is provided, is there a site map?		N/A There is a search engine, but no site map. A site map should be included in any event.
Is the site free of broken or bad links or other error messages?	8	Only one bad link encountered when canceling an entire order.
Average	7.6667	

Rating Comments

Web Design		
Are graphic files small enough to download quickly?	8	Yes, most graphics are no bigger than an icon in size, which is part of the problem when looking for a better image.
If screen elements, such as animated gifs and ticker tapes, are used, are they effective without being distracting?		N/A No animations or tickers, although there should be at least one on a page to catch the eye.
Is there a balance between design and functionality?	7	There could be a bit more flamboyance in the design, but functionality is very good.
Do the pages fit completely within your browser, or do you need to scroll in order to see the entire page?	6	This is the one area where most websites fall down. Here the page isn't too much longer than a 1024x768 screen.
Are the typefaces and font sizes easy to see and read?	10	Fonts and point sizes are well chosen.
Does the site make good use of colors?	10	Color is used throughout to set off different page elements.
Does the site project a good image of the company?	8	A very positive image is projected, although there are spelling and grammar errors on several pages, notably the FAQs, alphabetic search results, and About Us pages.
Average	8.1667	

Shopping Experience		
Is the site equally effective for the shopper who wishes to browse and for the one who wants to find an item and get out?	10	Effective for both browsers and quick shoppers.
Is the language clear, descriptive, concise, and easy to understand? Is it jargon-free? Is the general tone professional and friendly?	10	No jargon; language is clear, direct, understandable, and professional.
Is additional information provided to support the customer?	8	FAQs leave a little bit to be desired; product detail could be a little more descriptive.
Average	9.3333	

Rating Comments

Catalog Organization		
Is the product catalog easy to access from the home page?	10	Links to each section of the catalog in the header bar of each page.
Are product categories easy to understand?	10	Clear-cut categories.
Is catalog information organized in a logical and meaningful fashion?	10	Links in header bar organize products into logical categories.
Is the catalog easy to navigate?	10	Very easy navigation.
Is the product information useful and informative? Is it adequate? Does it encourage viewers to buy?	7	Product information could be a bit more extensive.
Are product photos provided? Do they download quickly?	8	Yes photos are provided and they download quickly, but the zoomed in versions are identical to the thumbnail versions.
Average	9.1667	

Shopping-Cart Implementation		
Is the shopping cart easy to use and understand? Are shopping-cart features clearly explained to the consumer?	10	Shopping cart is easy-to-use and straightforward.
Can the customer easily add items to and delete items from the shopping cart?	10	Quantity adjust and remove link provided for each item.
When adding an item or items to your shopping cart, can the customer view the contents of the cart?	10	Contents of cart automatically displayed for customer when items added.
Is there an obvious click path to the check-out process?	9	Checkout button prominently displayed on shopping cart summary displayed after each item added, although the button could be moved to the top of the table.
Is product inventory/availability information provided?	10	Provided on each product detail page, and again during checkout.
Average	9.8	

Rating Comments

Transaction Processing		
Does the site support secure credit card transactions? (If not, how payment is handled.)	10	Secure transactions.
Is the order form easy to understand and complete?	10	Straightforward order form.
Does the site indicate what it does with personal information about customers, if it is requested?		Privacy policy available from footer bar of each page.
Are payments processed in real time?	10	Appears that purchase amount is reserved on card, and then card is actually charged upon shipment.
Is the transaction completed quickly?	10	Fast transaction.
Is adequate information provided as confirmation of a successfully completed transaction?	10	Confirmation page is displayed, and confirmation email is sent upon order processing.
Is there a follow-up e-mail confirmation?	10	Sent upon order processing.
Average	10	

Customer Service		
Does the site have a privacy policy? If yes, is it easily accessible from the home page? Is it accessible from other areas of the site that ask customers for personal information?	10	Privacy policy available from footer bar of each page.
Does the site clearly explain shipping and handling procedures? Return policies? Product or service guarantees?	10	Shipping policy and order information available from footer bar on any page.
Does the site provide contact information for customers who prefer to order offline or for use in the event of technical or other problems?	9	Phone and fax order information is available. Phone number is not toll-free.
Does the site allow international orders?	8	Only orders from US and Canada.
Does the site have a separate customer-service section or clearly labeled customer-service information?	8	Customer service information is only available in the Contact Us link on the footer bar.
Does the site allow users to track orders and account activity?	8	Yahoo wallet is used to track orders and accounts.
Does the site make it easy for you to provide feedback/comments?	8	Contact Us link is the primary method for providing feedback, and the site does encourage it, but hides the information near the bottom of the page.
Does the site provide a forum/chat feature? Does it appear to support the primary purpose of the site?	6	No forum or chat is provided, but is probably not necessary.
Does the site give customers the opportunity to subscribe/unsubscribe to e-mail alerts or mailing-list discussions?	5	It claims to, but I could not figure out how to subscribe.
Does the site offer other value-added features?	7	A currency converter, language translator, and size converter are provided.
Is the customer experience quick and easy enough to bring the customer back, and keep him or her from going to competitors?	9	Very straightforward shopping experience provided.
Average	8	

Overall Average

8.88