

# EasyAsk<sup>®</sup>



## How Precision Search Facilitates Profitable B2B Commerce Sites

< *In short:* Faced with impatient buyers, costly call centers and intense competition, manufacturers, distributors and resellers can no longer rely on standard-issue commerce-site search. Instead, they are turning to smarter, fully integrated search technology: Not only do buyers gain the relevant product information and navigational choices they need for streamlined procurement, but also sellers realize new opportunities to profit from business-to-business (B2B) e-transactions.

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## Introduction: Goodbye to Browsing

During the day, business buyers bear little resemblance to consumer shoppers, who surf to e-tailers, compare product reviews and browse for specials. Instead, business buyers are restocking supplies, checking lead times and implementing procurement contracts. They know what they need, they buy from a relatively small circle of suppliers — and they want to get in and out of sites as efficiently as possible. But in the evening, these same buyers are shopping at LandsEnd.com and reading Forbes.com, so their expectations for ease-of-use in search functionality are high.

Despite the demise of many “dot-coms” — as well as idealistic industry exchanges — B2B trade never stopped expanding. Research firms estimate that B2B transactions in 2004 will total \$3.5 *trillion*, dwarfing consumer online spending.<sup>1</sup> Driving this expansion of online B2B commerce have been enormous process efficiencies and interlinked “supply webs” made possible by inexpensive computer horsepower.

At the nexus of all this activity is the less-than-glamorous but increasingly complex B2B site, struggling to address business goals that position e-transactions squarely in the path of company profitability. This whitepaper describes the central role that search plays in this setting as well as the defining characteristics of a successful search implementation from both the technical and marketing sides.

## Why Both Buyers and Sellers Need Better Search

Leaving aside all computer technology for a moment, at the heart of B2B is the same supplier-customer dynamic that’s changed little over the years. Sellers try to close deals and build relationships with buyers, who always express a variety of needs, motivations and knowledge. But the salesperson’s role is shifting from product information and order taking to consultative solutions and market development; unwieldy, often outdated catalogs are giving way to real-time inventory databases; and business buyers are rationalizing and consolidating their supply chains. In short, the selling process is moving swiftly online, and therein lies opportunity for competitive advantage — as well as peril for those who fall behind.

Today’s B2B site is a bridge to where most trade will occur in the very near future. From their respective positions on each side of the site, what are buyers and sellers looking for?

< **Buyers** want a site that welcomes and recognizes them: their purchase-order history, negotiated discounts, credit authorizations and shipping requirements. When they need to sift through hundreds of thousands of items, they may search by

product number, attributes or category – and they may want confirming visuals on the same page or intuitive navigation to similar products. If they can't find it, they won't buy it.

*They want a site that reduces errors and respects their time.*

< By the same token, **sellers** seek more satisfied and loyal customers in a lower-cost channel. They want less reliance on expensive call centers and inside sales, automated application of appropriate business rules, relevant and well-timed product recommendations, and more useful insight into search and purchase patterns.

*They want a site that cuts costs, boosts revenues and improves competitiveness.*

**Table 1: B2B Benefits to Both Sides of the E-transaction**

Benefits for Buyers	Benefits for Sellers
Reduced sourcing cycle time and cost <sup>2</sup>	Streamlined bidding cycle/shorter selling cycle
Better budgetary control	Better inventory control
Higher buyer productivity	Higher call-center productivity
Lower overall prices through product standardization and order consolidation	Increased average order size
Richer partnerships	Expanded market reach
Improved information management	Deeper customer analytics
Streamlined payables process	Streamlined receivables process
Improved ease-of-use regardless of industry or technical expertise	Strengthened customer loyalty

## What CIOs and CTOs Must Demand from Search Technology

More than ever, a robust and high-function site is a strategic linchpin. Search is both the “lubricant” that facilitates speedy navigation throughout the site and the “glue” that unites and presents relevant, heterogeneous product data at each decision point. Along with relational databases and HTTP networks, *search is a cornerstone technology*, the choice of which ultimately determines a site’s usability and success

A commercial site’s technical staff performs a balancing act every day, juggling the pressure for new features and faster reporting against the need to maintain back-end stability and performance. Because customers manage to find things on the site and don’t grumble too loudly, there’s an understandable skepticism about the need for superior search.

< *Search is search — how much better can another tool be?*

< *We just got the new product database on its feet; it would be a nightmare to integrate.*

< *I don’t have extra staff for administration, let alone for re-categorizing everything.*

But whatever your existing infrastructure looks like, dramatically enhancing its search capability and navigation isn’t necessarily time-consuming or labor-intensive. A dedicated, high-end search technology doesn’t compromise in an attempt to be an all-purpose catalog manager, customer-relationship application or portal; instead, it adds value to each of these applications by bringing a best-of-breed<sup>3</sup> linguistic platform to bear on B2B search, navigation and merchandising requirements. For the person who makes key technology-adoption decisions, search must:

**Integrate seamlessly** with your current web server, application server, operating system and database architecture, however heterogeneous. It should also have well-tested APIs that link to catalog/content managers, graphics storage and pricing engines.

**Install rapidly** without the need for new in-house skills or outside contractors. The software should be configured and operational in a matter of weeks —not months — and ongoing, centralized administrative overhead should be a fractional full-time employee (FTE). Downtime is obviously not an option.

**Build its own product metadata** from both structured data and unstructured content and encompass your customer-specific business rules. It should also be able to index new and substitute products automatically as they arrive in the catalog.

**Deliver almost instantaneous responses** to thousands of users. In addition to accuracy and relevancy, perceived speed is an essential component of site satisfaction and usability.

## How CMOs Win with More Powerful Search Capability

Facing far-reaching change in the way goods are bought, B2B marketers know they have to improve how their sites facilitate the evolving procurement function — or see buyers go elsewhere. They understand that constant buyer staff turnover introduces order inconsistencies and requires hand-holding; that major buyers are carefully re-examining every supplier relationship; that costly call centers inevitably produce errors in orders; and that retaining a current customer is far less expensive than acquiring a new one. They also know that solid metrics that relate to revenue validate the board-level case for further spending, and that every marketing decision affects a company's ability to generate profitable sales.

Nevertheless they hesitate, wondering where to focus their attention and invest their marketing dollars. Too often, site search is treated as a mundane piece of plumbing, inherently less appealing than a new campaign or a brand overhaul.

*< Customers manage to find things most of the time; “if it ain't broke...”*

*< Our search already spits out hundreds of hits!*

*< If buyers move more quickly through the site, won't I lose promotional opportunities?*

Consider yourself warned: It's dangerous to take search for granted or to leave the decision in the hands of a webmaster. Superior search spells the difference between satisfied and frustrated customers, between visitor conversion and site abandonment, between optimized and shotgun product offers, and between an intelligent customer interaction and a results list. At the deepest level, search is integral to site usability,<sup>4</sup> powerfully leverages spending on customer acquisition and product/brand promotion, and is the best customer interaction channel where merchandising and marketing meet. Ultimately, it's the payoff that fulfills the promise. But what characterizes a world-class search solution? It must:

**Support the varied ways people look for information** — from keyword search to guided navigation to natural-language questions — with identical results, and link disparate but related content repositories within a single “distributed” search. The site must also reflect B2B's extended purchase cycle by recalling user-specific searches.

**Pay for itself** through larger average order size, reduced cost per sale,<sup>5</sup> higher customer conversion and retention rates, automated business-rule execution, real-time campaign feedback and fine-tuning, and increased cross-selling and up-selling.

☑ **Enable customized merchandising and marketing** — synchronizing visuals, specs, and promotions with search results and navigation — so that you can proactively help customers find the right items and leverage their purchase history.

☑ **Generate profit-seeking metrics**, both programmed and ad-hoc, that uncover usage patterns and preferences, analyze promotion response, and help refine your mix of products, services and special offers.



## Summary: Outstanding Search Is a Cornerstone Technology

1. **Search is more** than a lot of results: it's the right results, easily obtained and synchronized with customer-appropriate navigation and merchandising. The end result? An intelligent customer interaction that benefits both buyer and seller. Most search tools don't measure up, especially in the complex B2B setting.
2. **Technical management** should assess search candidates by their flexibility, ease of integration, self-configuring metadata, low overhead and overall performance. Any software solution should be "battle-tested" in proven implementations for leading companies. For the content-management team, search is the single best way to locate what users want and integrate what users see.
3. **Marketing management** should evaluate search replacements by their ability to incorporate business rules on a customer-by-customer basis, deliver insightful metrics, enhance promotional campaigns with relevant merchandising, and reflect the way your best salespeople and customer-service representatives treat your best customers. Don't consider a tool that isn't already producing results for leading brands.

**About the Author:** O'Brien Resources principal **Daniel P. O'Brien** has spent his career at the intersection of communications and technology. As a strategy consultant, media analyst, information designer and market researcher, he helps clients turn their digital presence into competitive advantage.

As a Senior Analyst in the media group at Forrester Research, Dan's work focused on the ways new technology affects the delivery of information, advertising and entertainment – and how companies can grapple creatively with cross-media content, understand user behaviors and seize new business opportunities. In addition to authoring numerous reports and briefs, he was frequently quoted in publications such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Newsweek* and *Wired*.

Prior to joining Forrester, Dan was director of Internet commerce for Pearson Education, a leading educational and technical publisher, where he launched the company's online store. A former journalist and technology product manager, Dan holds degrees from Dartmouth College and Harvard Business School. He can be reached at [Hdan@obrienresources.com](mailto:Hdan@obrienresources.com).

<sup>1</sup> Average of estimates from IDC, Forrester Research, Yankee Group, Gartner Group and AMR Research. The median transaction size at B2B sites was \$800 vs. \$244 for B2C sites. (ActivMedia Research)

<sup>2</sup> GE's TPN estimates that it has cut the average procurement cycle from 18-23 days to 9-11 days; GE procurement departments now share information about their best suppliers around the world. (Dr. Kip Becker, Boston University)

<sup>3</sup> EasyAsk was named one of Computerworld's Innovative Technology Awards winners for 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Usability guru Jakob Nielsen maintains, "If there was just one thing we could fix on the Web, and for intranets as well, I would say let's fix search; that's still the number one single thing that's causing people problems." (Interview, *CIO Insight*, June 1, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> "Web-based sales are much cheaper than other sales methods, including face-to-face and telesales, by a factor of 2 to 10 times." (AMR Research)

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**EasyAsk for  
Commerce  
TECHNICAL  
SPECIFICATIONS**

A component of our flagship, award-winning search and information retrieval solution, EasyAsk for Commerce is a scalable, low-maintenance solution whose commitment to open architecture orientation simplifies implementations. It leverages existing J2EE-compatible architectures, including IBM WebSphere Commerce and IBM WebSphere Portal.

Built on an advanced linguistic engine, the software accesses and indexes an array of popular data sources, including Oracle, PeopleSoft, DB2, SQL and ERP, as well as data warehouses such as Business Objects and Cognos. It understands the content in more than 225 document types – including spreadsheets, presentations and HTML/ XML files – and can query both structured and unstructured data in a variety of internal and external repositories.

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**EasyAsk for  
Commerce  
MARKETING OBJECTIVES**

B2B marketers will find that EasyAsk for Commerce delivers precisely what buyers want: faster searching and navigational assistance through the thousands of SKUs on a catalog site, complete and accurate product information, and automatic application of business policies and agreements. By enabling reliable, high-performance commercial sites that attract buyers, EasyAsk for Commerce boosts the online-adoption rate and lowers the cost of call-center support.

Thanks to intelligent content indexing by EasyAsk's patented linguistic engine, buyers can search using keywords, phrases, attributes and natural-language questions – so customers with a wide range of industry expertise and technical proficiency can successfully locate the products they need. Because both navigation and merchandising dynamically reflect the current search, buyers shop in an optimized, comprehensive setting. The EasyAsk search engine can reach out to incorporate suppliers' databases as well, further enriching the available product information. And extracting behavioral patterns from customers' site activities is simple with EasyAsk's suite of reporting tools.

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**About EasyAsk, Inc.**

EasyAsk delivers search and information retrieval solutions that help organizations derive sustainable competitive advantage and rewarding customer experiences from scalable, secure, single point access to critical business information and insight.

Over 100 industry leading brands including retail, financial services, high technology and manufacturing companies such as Lawson Products, Lands' End, The Gap, E-Loan and Forbes.com rely on EasyAsk for increased effectiveness of their B2C or B2B cross-channel eCommerce efforts. Leading investors include Sigma Partners and Flagship Ventures. EasyAsk is headquartered near Boston with sales and support offices throughout the U.S. and Europe. For more information, please visit our website at <http://www.easyask.com/B2BCommerce/> or contact Brad Mannal by phoning him at 1-800-425-8200, Ext. 137, or emailing him at [bmanna@easyask.com](mailto:bmanna@easyask.com).