The Complete Guide to Council Website Search

From findability and user experience to personalisation and digital service uptake

Intro

Many of your website visitors, trained on Google and Amazon and often browsing from small mobile screens, turn first to search as a primary means of navigation.

Where user experience (UX) experts have valued site search for years, its true value is becoming ever more apparent to comms, marketing and IT leaders. As Forrester research notes, however, "search on many websites is an understaffed, IT-funded afterthought".

Search has a direct impact on key performance indicators. As councils increase digital service delivery and citizen engagement, modern search solutions can help improve customer experience (CX), shorten user journeys, and encourage channel shift to digital.

This guide is focused on three key concepts critical to implementing successful search on your website:

• **Information retrieval:** The most basic aspect of site search, refreshed with new tools
• **Key insights & analysis:** A modern site search solution should also provide significant insight into user needs and actions across digital properties, and support content quality improvement
• **Personalised customer experience:** More sophisticated search platforms can help you dynamically provide more relevant content and next step suggestions to get users where they want to go, faster.

A **checklist** for council site search requirements and features is at the end of this guide.

Why invest in site search?

Many website visitors rely on search.
To users accustomed to Google and Amazon, a disjointed search experience on a council website with separate search systems representing internal silos like property information, cemeteries, maps, and services - is relatively disappointing. Such users expect a unified search experience with rich search results that are contextually more helpful than a bland list of links.

43% of website visitors immediately go to the search bar

Forrester Research

Improve navigation and usability
Increase customer self-service
Increase user satisfaction
Improve findability through Internet search engines

Lower cost of customer interactions
Reduce reputational risk by surfacing key info

What can search do?

- Promote the most relevant content

- Help your staff improve content quality and accessibility

- Connect disparate silos

Calculating ROI

Investment in search can pay for itself quickly - even considering only direct cost savings, as the following scenario for a mid-size district council shows. The following example is based on average annual service enquiries to a council Customer Service Centre:

- Walk-in - 30,000
- Phone - 60,000
- Email - 20,000

Funnelback clients have reported reductions of up to 15% in service enquiries . The table below shows potential annual cost savings at different levels of reduction.

% reduction in phone and email enquiries	Cost savings / annum
Low - 2%	$22,282
Medium - 10%	$111,410
High - 15%	$167,115

Notes:
Calculations are based on the following average cost per enquiry through each support channel, and reduction is calculated at same % for each channel:

- Walk-in - $20.90*
- Phone - $6.86*
- Email - $3.78**

* British Society of Information Technology Management survey of 120 cities, 2012 survey, converted to $NZ.
** Gartner/Avaya, converted to $NZ

Information retrieval

55% of users will abandon their online visit if they can't find information quickly.

In the age of effortless whole-of-web (Google), entertainment (Netflix) and retail (Amazon) search, your visitors expect intuitive and accurate search results immediately.
While council websites have a particular challenge in their breadth of content, mix of services, and varied audiences - modern search solutions can greatly improve the customer experience.

Information retrieval

Know your users

The first questions to consider: why are visitors on your site, and what are they looking for.

Using your existing web analytics tools, consider which pages and search terms are popular. Combine this hard data with more subjective reports based on your most common email inquiries, phone calls and feedback on what your visitors can't find. This data provides a sense of any holes in your digital presence. And ideally, include search in any usability testing you do.

With this data and user insight you can progressively optimise your content model, site navigation and wayfinding tools including search, for quicker access to user-relevant, popular, key and timely content.

Information retrieval
Speak your user's language

Local government has its own terminology but your users will just search on the terms they know.

Even the most user-friendly council website will use specialist terminology in places, and your search should help users find what they need even if they don't use the council term for it.

Your search should also recognise and respond to common misspellings, slang, preferred format (video, Facebook, PDF, HTML), and jumbled words. If your council or tourism website has international visitors, you might even include common searches in other languages.

Modern search solutions provide tools to deal with these linguistic challenges, such as contextual navigation, query completion, synonyms, best bets and automatic spelling corrections.
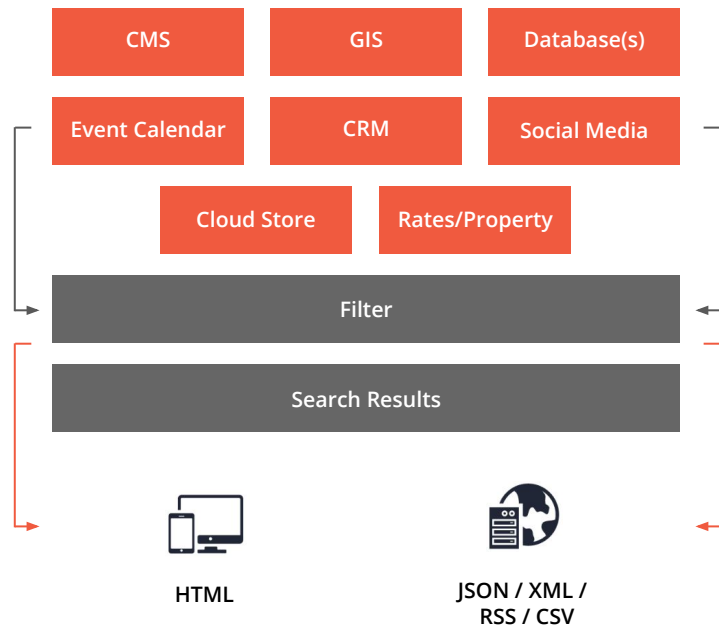
Refuse =

Rubbish

Garbage

Information retrieval
Connect silos & index everything

Website content is all too often restricted by internal silos. Your users don't care where your information is stored, or if the best answer is spread across multiple content repositories. They just want to find relevant, accurate and timely information or the appropriate next step.

A modern search solution can unify results wherever your content and data lives. For example, you could index all your websites, (whether you manage them in your CMS or not), and present combined search results, or search across multiple internal repositories.

However, care needs to be taken that your intended enhancements do actually increase findability and improve the customer experience. The key is understanding what your users consider to be relevant. You will find clues in the search terms your users are entering. For example, users entering addresses in your site search suggests they're looking for property information. User testing your search enhancement ideas will help you identify real user value and iron out usability issues early.

CMS	GIS	Database(s)
Event Calendar	CRM	Social Media
	Cloud Store	Rates/Property

Filter

Search Results

HTML

JSON / XML / RSS / CSV

Information retrieval

Shorten user journeys

Effective UX design considers the navigation routes and likely actions for various personas who interact with your site. The intention is always to shorten your user's journey to their intended target, whether to choose a walk, pay a rates bill, apply for a consent or book a building inspection.

Good site search is built around best practices in UX. Seek to shorten the user journey, from your first search results page to finding the answer they require. A modern site search solution should include such features as contextual navigation, autocomplete/autosuggest and UI design elements to help you shorten user journeys and improve the CX.
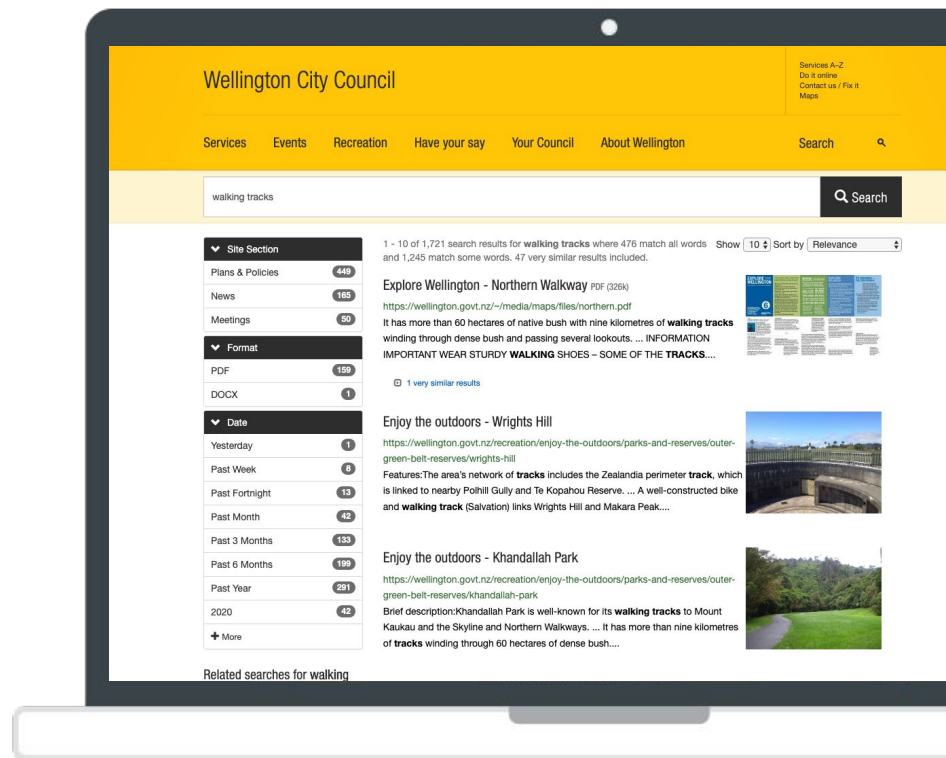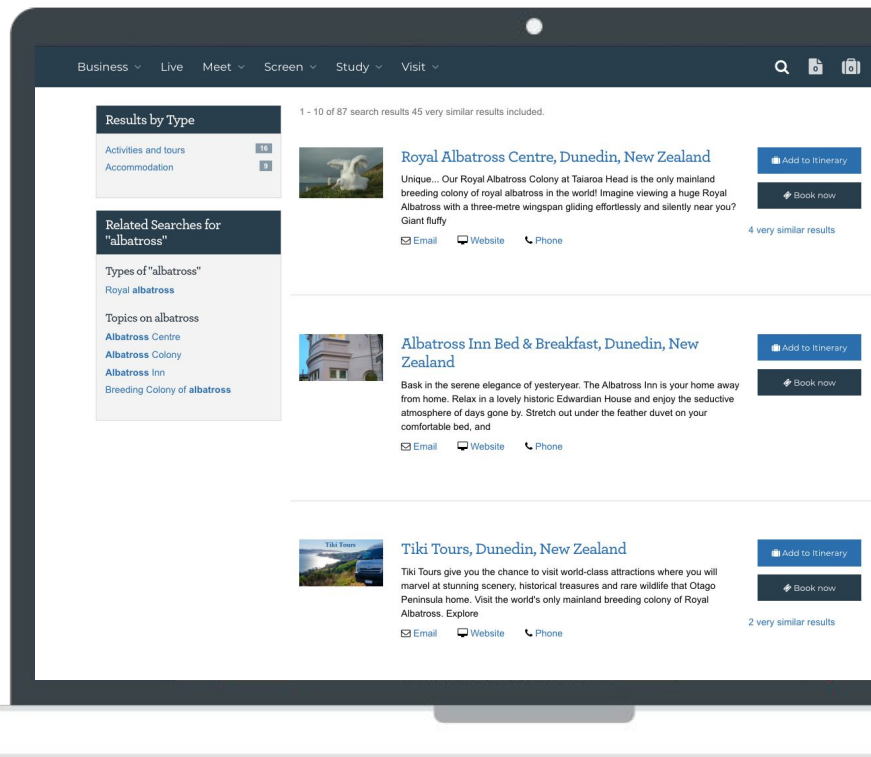
Information retrieval
Provide richer results and save clicks

Your search results page should deliver more than just accurate search results. Modern site search solutions allow richer results whose greater usefulness is based on deeper understanding of user behaviour derived from analytics.

Beyond a plain list of page titles and links, your search results can include more useful, visual or actionable information right on the search results page.

Tourism sites, with their singular focus on marketing a destination, often provide rich search results that are both visually appealing and support the next step, to build an itinerary or make a booking.

On council websites, richer search results can help users by also surfacing associated key information related to a query and search result (such as maps, or links to forms, or contact details, or opening hours), which may save a further click, or prompt the correct next step in a process.
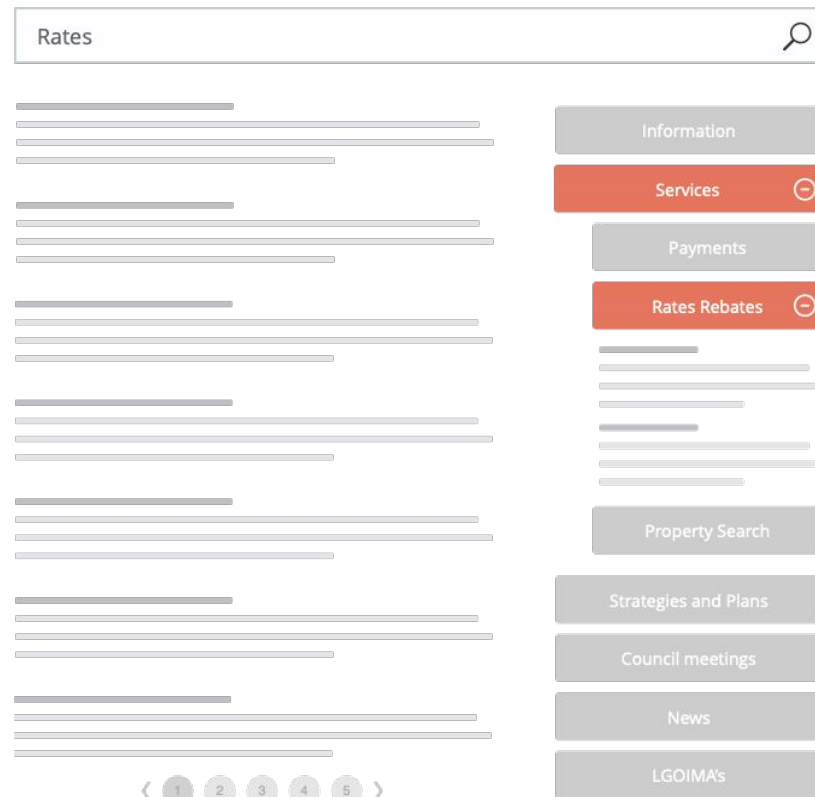
Information retrieval

Support discovery

'Searching' actually covers a spectrum of user needs and behaviours.

Some searchers know exactly what they're looking for and want the right answer… eg "pool opening hours" .

Others are in more exploratory mode. For example, a home owner considering renovations, a journalist researching an article, or a citizen interested in council plans for their area.

Instead of a list of links, these 'explorers' are better supported by being able to see all the types of information related to their query, how they're related, and to navigate through these: council strategies and plans, minutes, reports, maps, news releases, rates information, LGOIMAs, media releases, social media, consultations…

Rates

Information

Services ⊖

Payments

Rates Rebates ⊖

Property Search

Strategies and Plans

Council meetings

News

LGOIMA's

❮ 1 2 3 4 5 ❯

Key insights & analysis

Modern site search should provide analysis and key insights into user behaviour AND support ongoing content improvement with high-value dashboards and reports, from accessibility compliance to missing metadata and undesirable content.

Together this analysis and reporting provide actionable insights to help you achieve your website's goals, as well as improve your customer experience.

Key insights & analysis
Improve content

Maintaining the trust of customers is important to councils. Impressions matter, and the 'quality' of your website content is one way customers may form an impression of council competence and helpfulness.

A modern site search can help your Comms team gauge your website content quality, and improve it. Broken links, misspellings, duplicate or undesirable content, bad grammar, accessibility fails - your site search solution should provide an overview and insight into your content library with advice on changes to improve content quality.
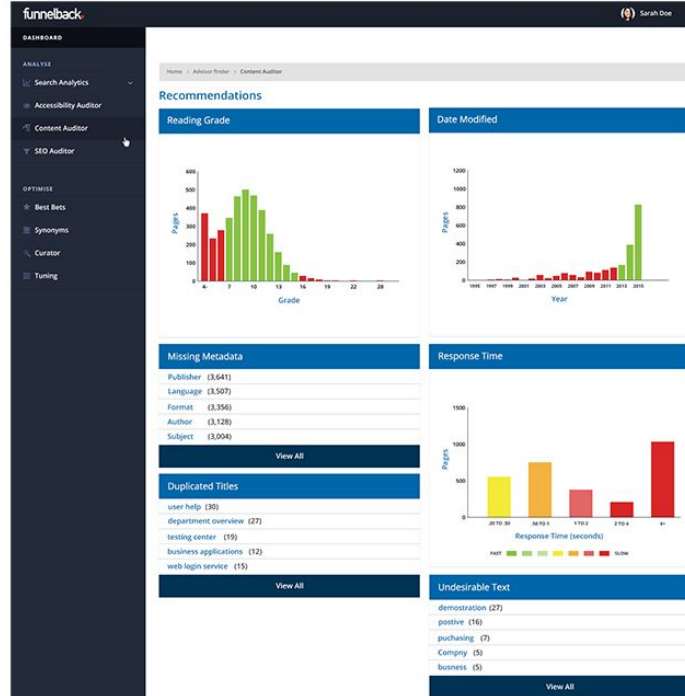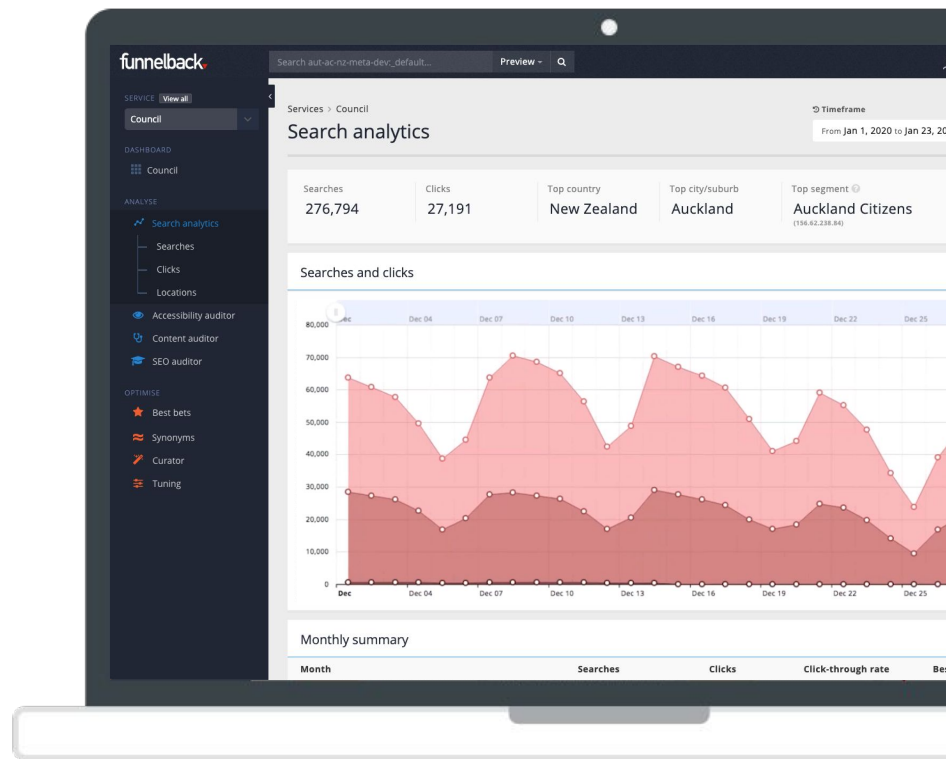
Key insights & analysis

Understand your users

Data from modern site search combines with website analytics to enable fine-grained understanding of your users, and improve their CX over time.

Your search solution should provide a dashboard or otherwise make it easy to see the search terms your users are searching on, and what search results they're clicking on. Seeing which search terms have no corresponding search results allows you to redirect users to existing content, or to broaden results to include misspellings and synonyms, or create new content responding to those queries.

Understanding which regions, cities and countries your users are searching from, affords opportunities for 'macro-personalisation', as does industry segment statistics.

Key insights & analysis

Hone your site and search performance to key metrics

As we move towards increasingly data driven operations, dashboards take centre stage in the control room.

Your search dashboard has real-time access to a unique dataset, and analytics capabilities that can alert you to unsatisfactory CX, broad user trends and even forewarn you of emerging community issues.

Integrated with your other dashboards, analysis and insights from search can help you understand how and why users achieve their goals, and meet your website targets - or not.

Web professionals know their goals and key metrics, analyse relevant data, and iterate on their work continuously to optimise performance and improve their results. Optimised site search contributes by providing the right information or next step, at the right time, to the right person.
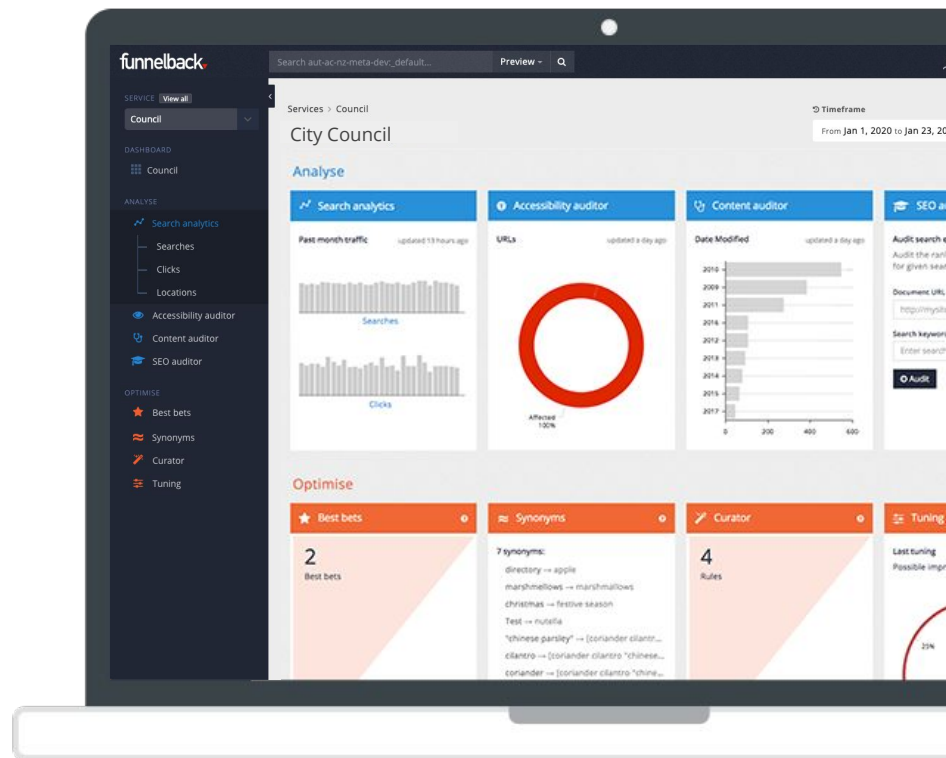
Personalising experiences

Conditioned by Spotify-type recommendations, social media, online ads and tailored web searches, user expectations of a comparable level of personalised service from their council website will only increase. Other websites serve me content relevant to me, why can't my council? Modern site search can help you provide a more tailored experience for each user, while complying with privacy and other applicable law and standards. Search can help tailor the user experience at all levels, from the macro, right down to the individual.
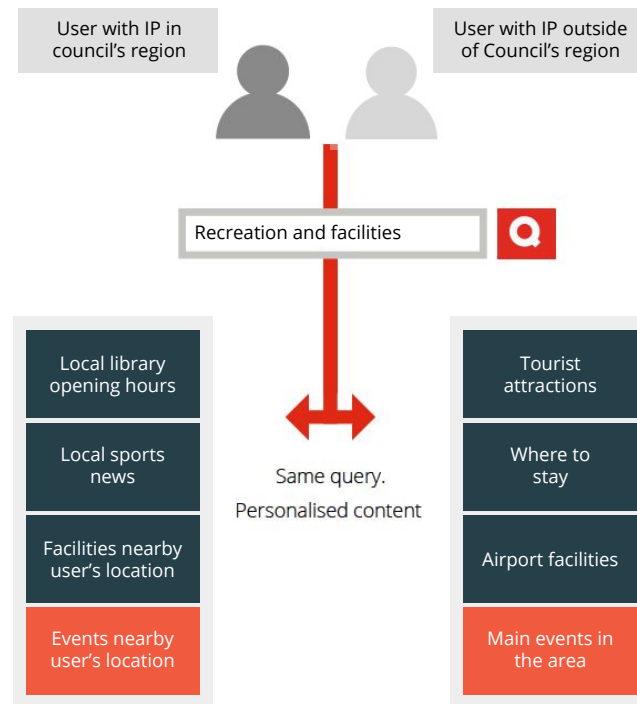
Personalising experiences
Dynamic & proactive

Old, 'reactive' search is being superseded by modern, dynamic search solutions

Say 'site search' and you're probably thinking of a search box, and a search results page. But innovative organisations are also using their site search behind the scenes to assemble or vary content on web pages to provide the content or functionality likely to be more relevant to that user at that time. Effectively, the search solution is responding to cues gleaned from such sources as the user's browser (e.g. language), or IP address, location, or recent behaviour (eg visited page X).

Like Netflix or Amazon, dynamic pages - whether web pages or search results pages - harness the power of search to understand a user's likely next step and proactively surface recommended content or actions.

From landing pages with search-powered content to functional messages in search results, your search platform should be capable of powering dynamic pages and proactively serving up a more personalised experience.

User with IP in council's region

User with IP outside of Council's region

Recreation and facilities

Local library opening hours

Local sports news

Facilities nearby user's location

Events nearby user's location

Tourist attractions

Where to stay

Airport facilities

Main events in the area

Same query. Personalised content

Personalising experiences
Macro personalisation

Most modern site search solutions can respond to information automatically gleaned from your user's browser, IP address, or session, such as location or language setting.

With this information, you can begin to serve more relevant content or a helpful next step. For example, international visitors to your council site could be prompted to visit your tourism website, or a local user searching on 'LIM' could be shown the LIM report application form.

Benefits
- Deliver more relevant search results
- Provide a contextually relevant next step
- Foster increased customer self-service

Limitations
- While useful, location, language and time zone may not provide the level of personalisation many expect
- Limited ability to create an experience tailored to the individual visitor

Personalising experiences
Micro personalisation

As councils build out digital services, trends suggest the next frontier is personalisation: individually tailored digital content and services.
While businesses are motivated by increasing sales and customer loyalty, councils are looking to addressing customer needs better, increasing uptake of digital services, and improving efficiency.

Some councils already provide account-based portals offering a range of transactions and account-related information, and these will continue to grow in value as siloed council systems are connected, and a 'single view of customer' is attained.

However, even non-logged in users can be served better. A good place to start is by understanding the user journeys of key audience segments represented by user personas. Then ask how your website can shorten their most common user journeys, such as checking recycling collection days or booking a building inspection. Modern site search can make and act on inferences about user needs, and so contribute to a micro personalisation strategy.

Benefits
- Provide a modern CX
- Increase digital service uptake
- Power personalised search results and dynamic content across your website/s

Limitations
- Personalisation needs to be carefully considered to ensure that it is appropriate and meets regulations
- Siloed data sources can be challenging to integrate effectively, especially if undertaken alone

Summary

Study after study in the commercial world has shown a correlation between effective site search and an increase in conversions, user satisfaction and a streamlined user experience. As councils look to increase digital service uptake and citizen engagement, Comms and IT leaders are tasked with finding more effective ways to meet their KPIs and combat the age-old challenge of siloed data. Website search has proven a robust, reliable and intelligent part of the solution for businesses: so it is for councils.

Use the checklist in the following pages to evaluate your current or prospective site search and see opportunities for "quick wins" in the user experience on your site.

Find out more about how Funnelback can help transform the user experience at:
https://www.squiz.net/platform/products/insight-engine
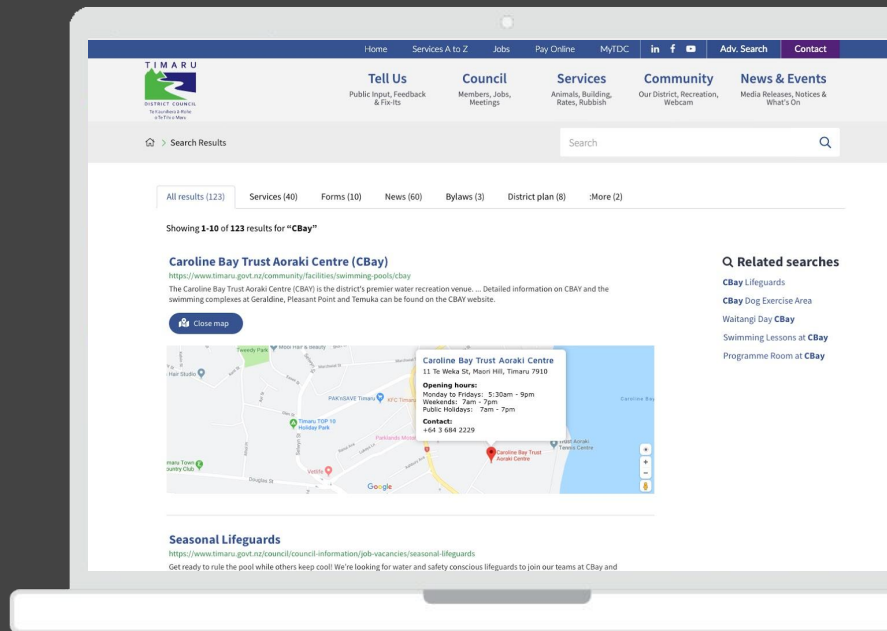
Checklist: Your site search

Whether you're examining your current site search solution, comparing vendors, or analysing user experience (UX) across your digital properties, this checklist will help you ensure all the valuable opportunities are covered.

Feature	Requirements	Notes for your website
1. Index all relevant content *List all the different data sources you will need to index content from. (For example, your CMS, GIS, social media, event calendar, staff directory, maps, and any databases.)*	Make sure your search provider can index multiple data sources. Many stop at your CMS. A truly useful search experience crosses silos and provides access to all relevant data.	
2. Speak to everyone *Digital service delivery, citizen engagement and e-democracy requires attention to how you communicate with your community.*	Ensure that your search solution comes with tools that enable you to make direct adjustments to your user experience. For example, you should be able to create synonyms to stop users from hitting dead ends.	
3. Control your ranking *The freedom to control your search rankings allows you to promote certain results to the top of the results page, or hide content or entire sources that you don't want users to uncover.*	Your chosen solution shouldn't lock down algorithms, but allow you to tune your collections to fit your organizational needs. Ideally, you should have complete control over your results pages and the ability to promote and hide URLs.	

Checklist: Your site search

Feature	Requirements	Notes for your website
4. Be engaging *Your site search shouldn't detract from your site design or user experience objectives.*	Ensure that your search solution has the ability to fit seamlessly into your site, matching your design while supplementing results pages with rich media thumbnails, maps and people profiles.	
5. Localise content *Your site search should reflect your other content, and be capable of localisation.*	Site search should be capable of responding to inferred and known identity of the searcher, providing, for example, the most relevant information for in-district searchers, or for international visitors.	
6. Fix your content *Discover weaknesses in your content library, down to document level, with actionable insights on how to improve.*	Your search engine should be capable of providing insight into the content it is indexing. This includes user-friendly review of relevant metadata (author, date etc.), assessing the reading age, or checking for duplicate content or broken links.	

Checklist: Your site search

Feature	Requirements	Notes for your website
7. Understand user behavior *Sophisticated insights and analytics help you understand how your users interact with your site search, and permit you to take action to improve the search experience.*	Site search is an integral part of your digital platform. Independently or as part of a broader dashboard, you should be aware of trends and shifts in behavior on your search page and able to react quickly to account for these changes.	
8. Get personal *Use your search engine for more than information retrieval. A true insight engine allows you to personalise content across your site relating to what you know about a visitor.*	Your site search solution should have the capacity to drive personalised experiences, be it at a macro or micro level.	
9. Consider user journeys *Make adjustments or changes to your user journey within the site search administration interface.*	Adjusting the user journey can include anything from setting rules on what certain users can see, to contextual navigation, alerts, recommendations or autocomplete.	

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