

SQUIZ

The Guide to Site Search for Higher Education



Squiz Funnelback

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Introduction

Modern website visitors, trained on Google and Amazon and often saddled with small mobile screens, are increasingly turning 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 evident to marketing and IT leaders. Despite this, Forrester research notes that “search on many websites is an understaffed, IT-funded afterthought.”

Search should have a direct impact on key performance indicators.

And a growing number of institutions are measuring the value of digital visitors across their properties. Study after study has shown that site search drives key conversion metrics, from registering for classes to alumni donations. Relatively few digital investments can prove ROI as quickly, for both marketing and IT, as site search.

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.



Key insights & analysis: Look for significant insight into user needs and actions across digital properties, from trends to accessibility tools.



Personalized experiences: More sophisticated search platforms build extensive personalizations across your digital properties.

A [convenient checklist](#) is at the end of this guide.

Why invest in site search?

Many of your site visitors likely rely on search. For higher education, the average is 43% of your visitors, to be exact.¹ However, the default search experience can be disjointed and frustrating - especially if there are separate search systems for faculty, events and courses. Your users expect a cross-silo, Amazon-like search experience. Too often, the actual experience is a cobbled-together mix of program, athletic, recruitment and alumni landing pages.

Benefits of intelligent site search

- ▶ Dynamically offer the most relevant content
- ▶ Provide insight across your content library
- ▶ Connect services across institutional silos



43% of visitors

to higher education sites rely on search.

1. mStoner/Funnelback, 2019

An effective search experience should:

INCREASE

Average visitor time
on site

SEO rankings

Findability of information

Quality of your
online content

User satisfaction

Key metrics,
e.g. prospect acquisition

DECREASE

Lower cost of interaction

Reduce reputational risk

Reduce accessibility challenges

Information retrieval

In the age of effortless web, entertainment and retail search, your visitors – especially Gen Z – expect their search experience to deliver intuitive and accurate results immediately.

INFORMATION RETRIEVAL

1. Know your users

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

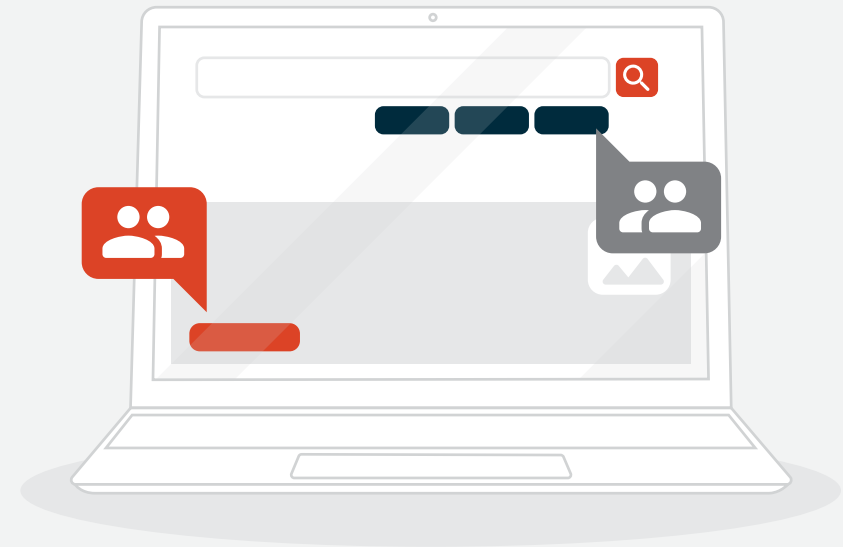
Using your existing web analytics tools, consider which pages and search terms are popular. Combine this hard data with more subjective reports based on your most common email inquiries, phone calls and feedback on what your visitors can't find. This data provides a sense of any holes in your digital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

With this data, many digital marketing teams are already providing ready access to key pages and other digital content through site navigation. How does your search system perform in surfacing the same key data?



55% of users

will abandon their online visit if they can't find information within a few seconds.¹

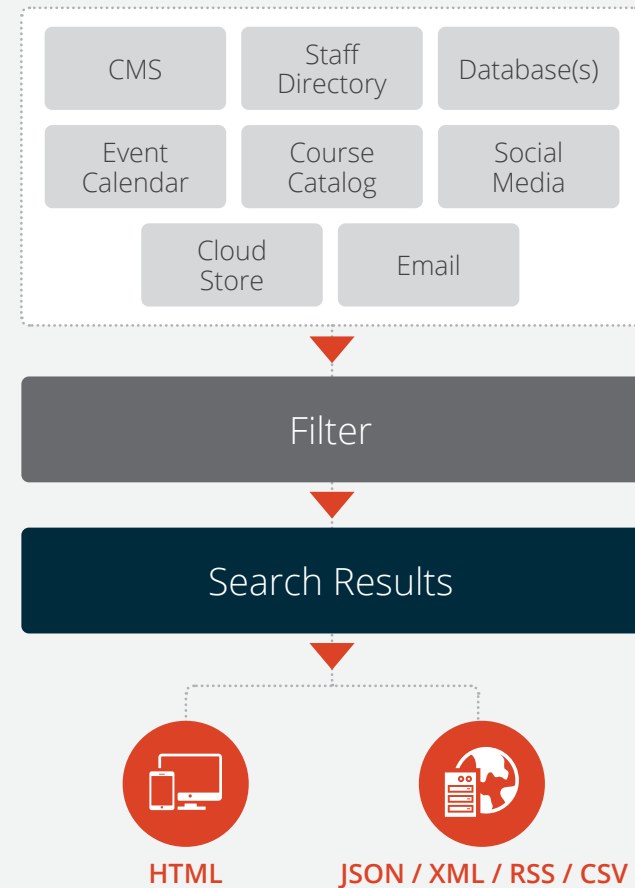


1. Hubspot, 2014

2. Connect silos & index everything

Too often in higher education, information is locked in silos. Faculty directories are kept separate from athletic calendars, and student research in architectural history is separate from that in engineering. 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 the most relevant and accurate information.

Your job as an IT or marketing leader is to make it easier for your users. If you are able to unite content across data and institutional silos, you'll become a hero to your users and to institutional leadership.



3. Speak your user's language

Especially in higher ed, a generational gap can mean vast communication differences.

Be sure that you speak the language of your students, prospects, parents and alumni. Your search should recognize and respond common misspellings, slang, preferred format (video, Facebook, PDF, HTML), and jumbled words. If you host international students, you might even include common searches in other languages (Donner = Пожертвування = Donate).

In many search solutions, you can provide for these linguistic challenges with contextual navigation, query completion, synonyms, best bets and automatic spelling corrections.

Car =

automobile

motor car

auto

cerdit



Did you mean

credit



Current offer

Credit card

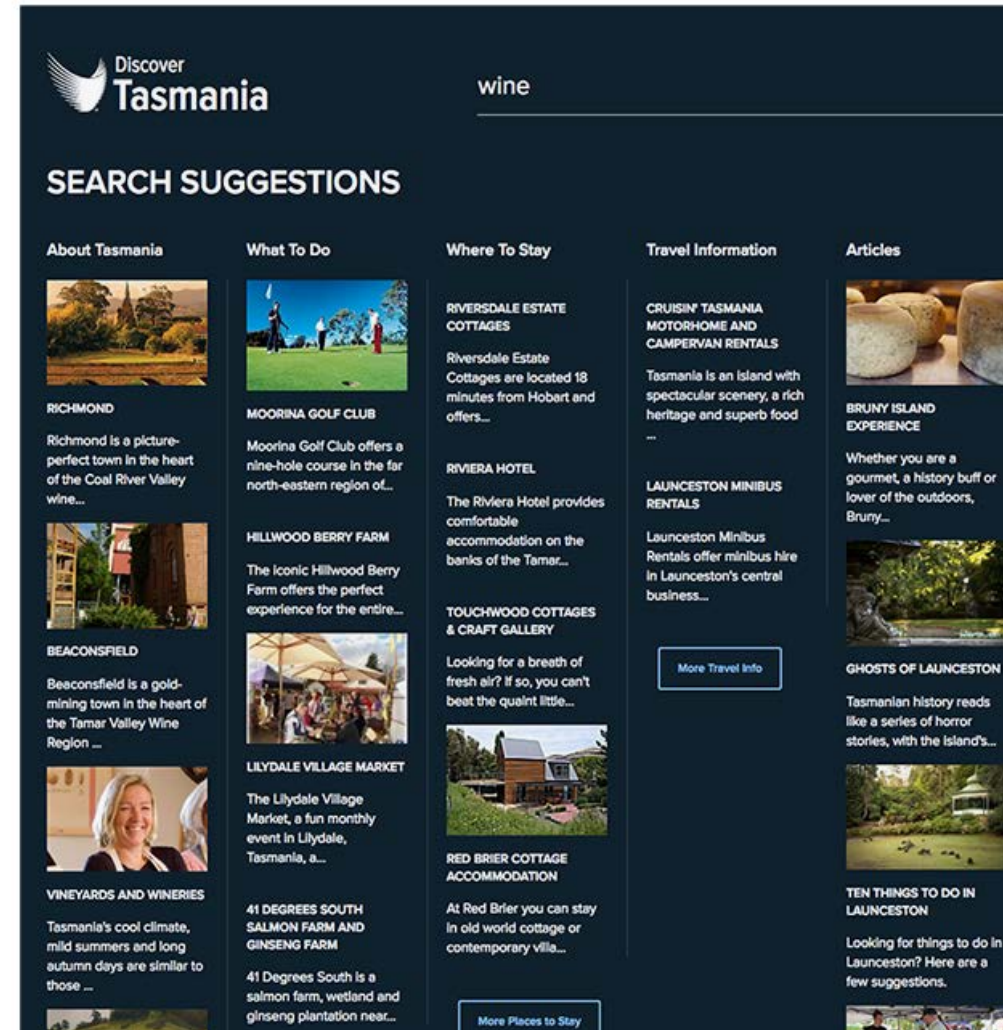
Apply now

4. Beyond search

Your search results page should deliver more than just accurate search results. Site search solutions provide the opportunity to tailor results with supplementary information targeted to your users and their specific queries.

Search results pages should be a showcase for your institution and its offerings. Beyond a list of the most relevant results, your search results page should include rich media, campus maps, relevant events, related social media, staff or faculty phone numbers, and more.


















Many searchers have specific content in mind. Others are exploring. Provide each with the most robust results.



The screenshot shows the 'Discover Tasmania' website with a search bar containing the word 'wine'. Below the search bar, the 'SEARCH SUGGESTIONS' section is displayed, organized into five columns: 'About Tasmania', 'What To Do', 'Where To Stay', 'Travel Information', and 'Articles'. Each column contains a list of suggestions with accompanying images and brief descriptions.

Discover Tasmania wine

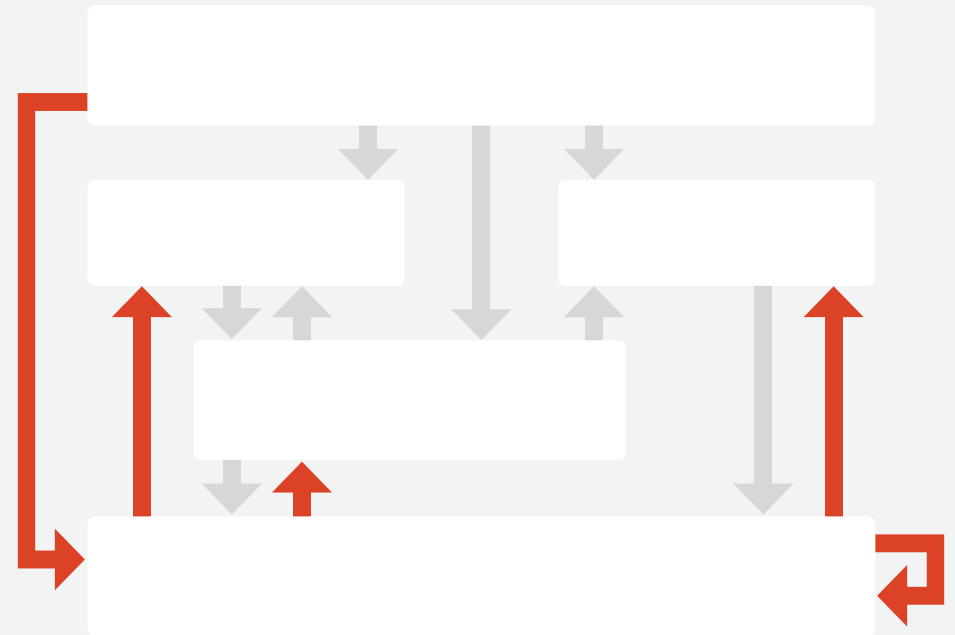
SEARCH SUGGESTIONS

About Tasmania	What To Do	Where To Stay	Travel Information	Articles
 RICHMOND Richmond is a picture-perfect town in the heart of the Coal River Valley wine...	 MOORINA GOLF CLUB Moorina Golf Club offers a nine-hole course in the far north-eastern region of...	 RIVERSDALE ESTATE COTTAGES Riversdale Estate Cottages are located 18 minutes from Hobart and offers...	 CRUISIN' TASMANIA MOTORHOME AND CAMPERVAN RENTALS Tasmania is an island with spectacular scenery, a rich heritage and superb food ...	 BRUNY ISLAND EXPERIENCE Whether you are a gourmet, a history buff or lover of the outdoors, Bruny...
 BEACONSFIELD Beaconsfield is a gold-mining town in the heart of the Tamar Valley Wine Region ...	 HILLWOOD BERRY FARM The iconic Hillwood Berry Farm offers the perfect experience for the entire...	 RIVIERA HOTEL The Riviera Hotel provides comfortable accommodation on the banks of the Tamar...	 LAUNCESTON MINIBUS RENTALS Launceston Minibus Rentals offer minibus hire in Launceston's central business...	 GHOSTS OF LAUNCESTON Tasmanian history reads like a series of horror stories, with the island's...
 VINEYARDS AND WINERIES Tasmania's cool climate, mild summers and long autumn days are similar to those ...	 LILLYDALE VILLAGE MARKET The Lillydale Village Market, a fun monthly event in Lillydale, Tasmania, a...	 RED BRIER COTTAGE ACCOMMODATION At Red Brier you can stay in old world cottage or contemporary villa...	 More Travel Info	 TEN THINGS TO DO IN LAUNCESTON Looking for things to do in Launceston? Here are a few suggestions.
 41 DEGREES SOUTH SALMON FARM AND GINSENG FARM 41 Degrees South is a salmon farm, wetland and ginseng plantation near...	 More Places to Stay			

5. 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 provide the smoothest interaction for your user to find their intended target, whether an application page, a donate button or information about a course or event.

Good site search is built around best practices in UX. Seek to shorten the user journey, from your first page to finding the answer they require. Contextual navigation, auto-complete/auto-suggest and UI design elements in site search ensure that user journeys get shorter and conversion rates grow ever higher.



Key insights & analysis

Modern, powerful site search should provide analysis and key insights into user behavior. These data points provide astute marketers and IT leaders with the insight needed to exceed your key goals.

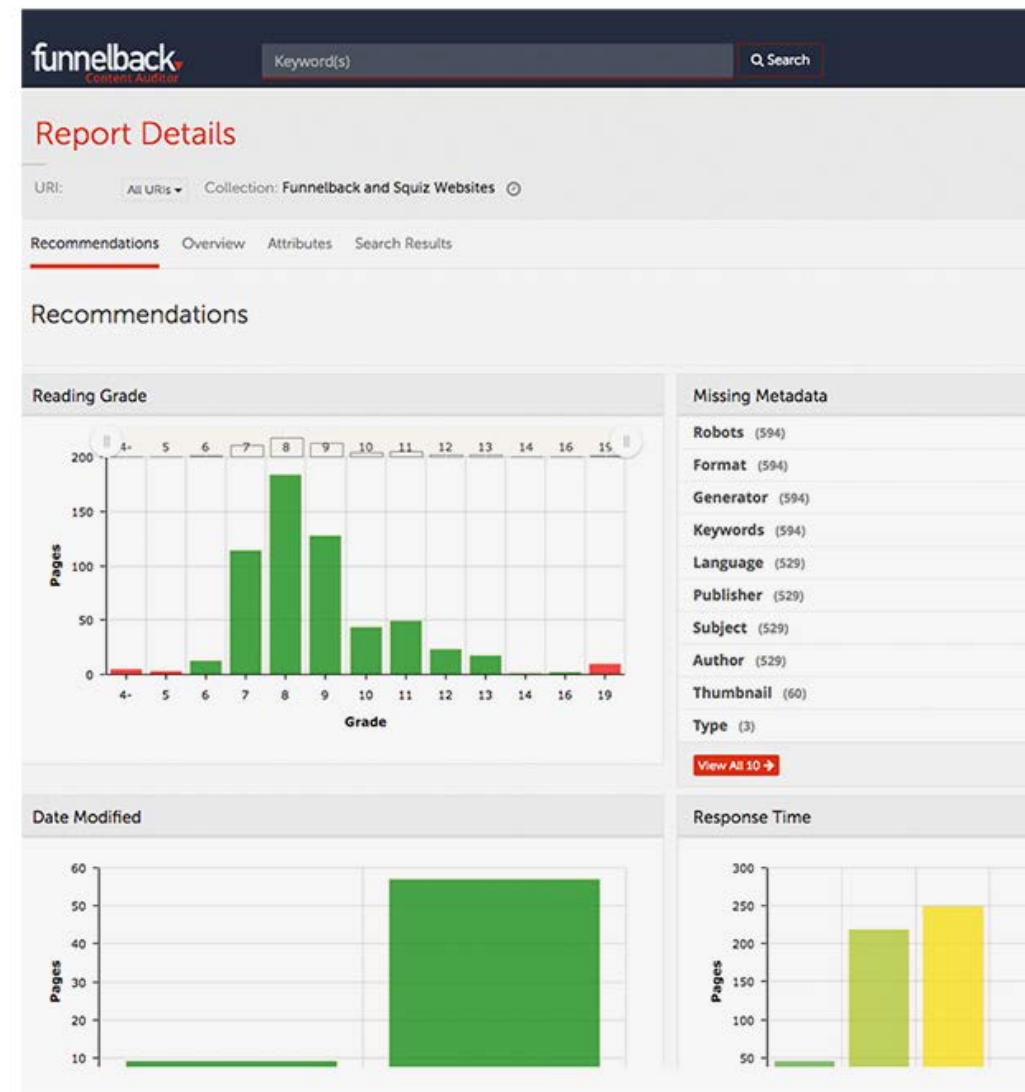


KEY INSIGHTS & ANALYSIS

1. Improve content

Higher education has been uniquely positioned in the era of content marketing. Most institutions are already content factories, from research reports to admissions documents and social media posts. A good site search solution can uncover great content that might have been overlooked. A bad search solution can surface bad content over good and diminish the value of your content to users.

Modern marketers consider site search and content marketing as a team. Whether it is broken links, missing metadata, bad grammar or duplicate content, your site search solution should provide an overview and insight into your content library with advice on changes that can improve your online experience.



KEY INSIGHTS & ANALYSIS

2. Understand your users

Most of us are already mystified by the behavior of Gen Z. Any insight into their behavior, interests and needs is of tremendous value.

Site search should uncover the questions and terms your users are asking, helping you to precision-target a digital strategy to your varied audiences.

One simple solution built in to most site search systems? A list of unanswered search queries presents an opportunity to create content responding to the queries, re-direct users to existing answers or perhaps broaden results shown to include misspellings and synonyms.

Services > Healthcare Provider - Analytics

Search analytics

Searches

4,791,514

Clicks

2,076,623

Top country

United States

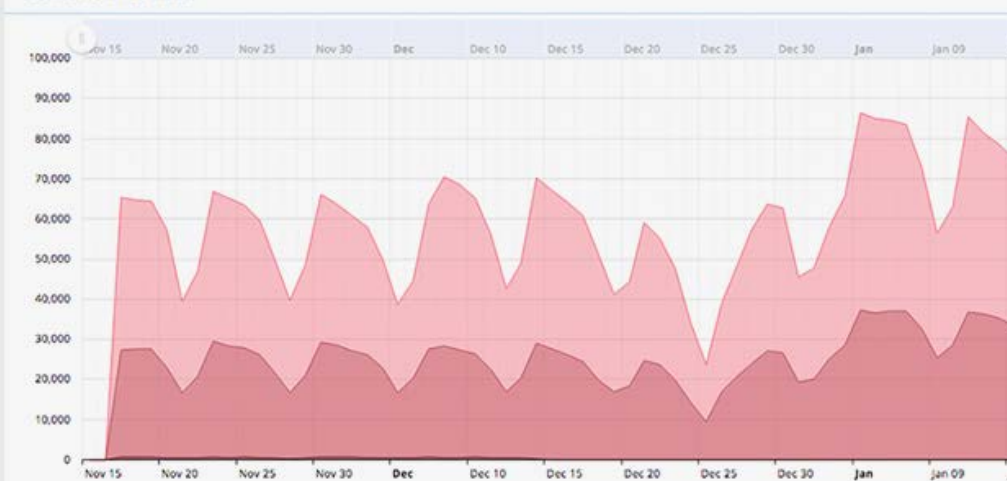
Top city/suburb

Unknown

Top segment

SherWeb Inc
(137,135,143,245)

Searches and clicks



Monthly summary

Month	Searches	Clicks	Click-through
2016 - February	1,150,210	507,537	44.13%
2016 - January	2,241,450	993,622	44.33%
2015 - December	1,666,425	700,463	42.03%

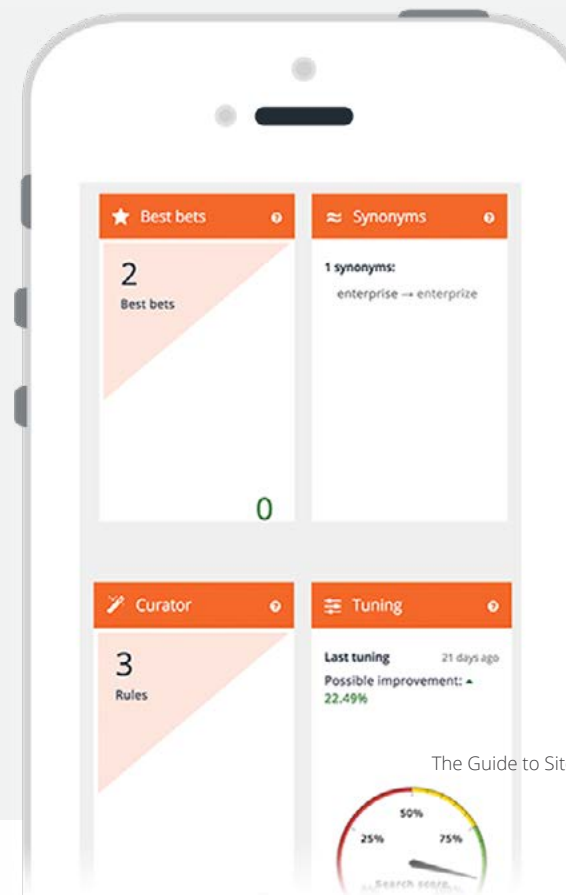
3. Refine and perfect your campaigns

Most leaders understand that dashboards are the control room of any operation. More than broad insights, dashboards present the opportunity to refine the mechanisms of an organization, campaign or platform.

The search dashboard is no different. Gain a broad understanding of activities across your digital properties, then react by refining search results, boosting or reducing campaigns and quickly respond to new trends.

Properly integrated into your other dashboards, insights and analysis from search can help you understand how and why users meet your conversion metrics – from registering for classes to donating to an alumni fund.

Website professionals iterate on their work constantly to improve their results. Likewise, site search only grows better over time as expert users iterate to provide maximum value to users and administrators.



Personalizing experiences

Users expect your website to provide a tailored experience while respecting modern privacy standards.

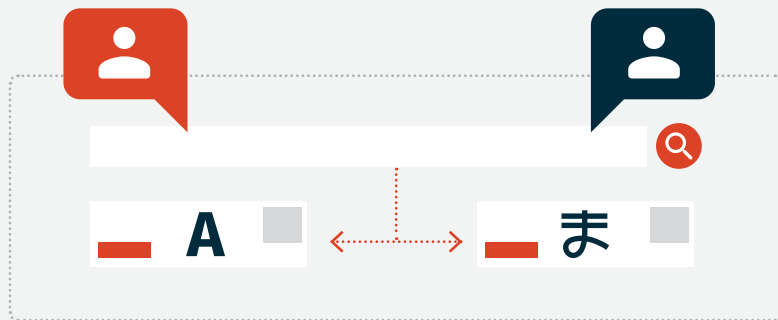


PERSONALIZING EXPERIENCES

1. Macro personalization

Most modern site search solutions can personalize your user experience through macro level details, such as location or language.

With this information, you can begin to serve more personalized and relevant content to your users. International students, for example, will receive more relevant details. You can also restrict or promote certain content: for example, building directions are likely to be more useful to those on campus.



Benefits

- ▶ Deliver unique experiences based on location or language
- ▶ Provide a more precise list of the most relevant results
- ▶ Connect your users to information that matters to them
- ▶ Customize with local language, currency or region

Limitations

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

2. Micro personalization

Research suggests that personalization and loyalty go hand in hand. Increase one and the other will follow. Loyal alumni are more likely to stay engaged; loyal prospects are more likely to apply - and share their excitement with similar students.

Personalization is best when your CMS, marketing automation and CRM systems are unified, allowing you to create a unique experience based upon a user's profile and their history interacting with your institution. If an existing student or candidate has already logged into your system, you might already know their gender, age, location, campus and preferred major. If your CRM is limited or not yet implemented across departments, search might even be able to integrate multiple CRM systems.

Each user should experience a tailored journey. Even new visitors can experience a semi-customized

experience with search. On their next visit, the courses they marked are retained in search to ensure a seamless experience.

Benefits

- ▶ Experiences reflective of major consumer sites
- ▶ Stand out from competitors
- ▶ Boost loyalty and student retention
- ▶ Power personalized search results and dynamic content across your website

Limitations

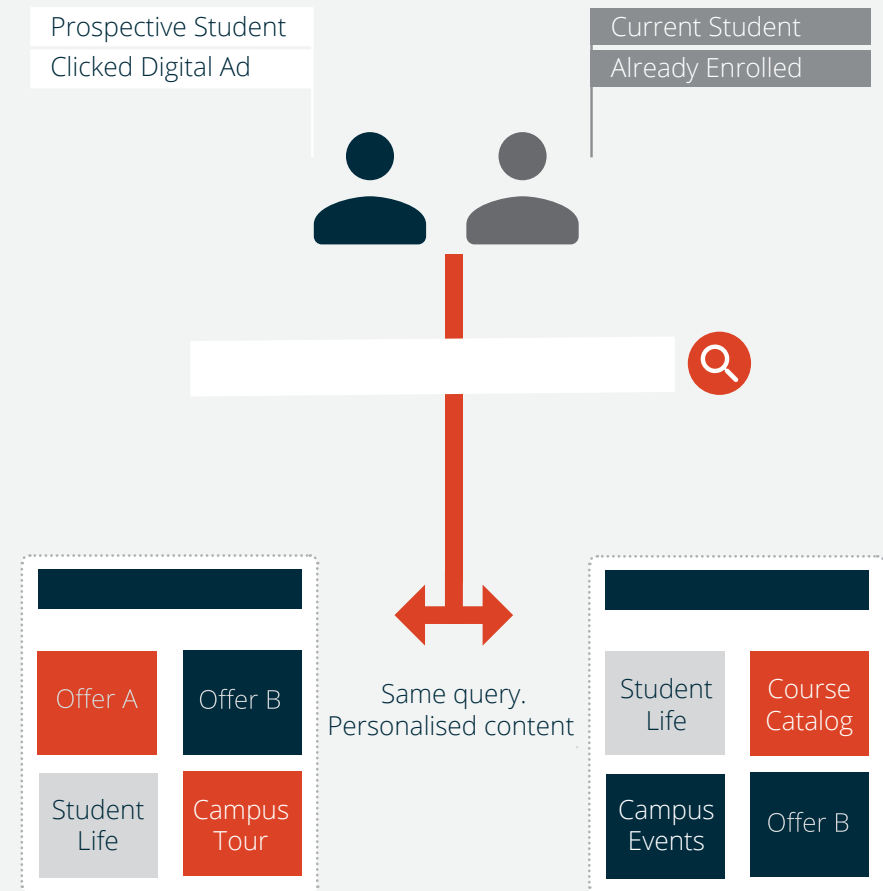
- ▶ Personalization needs to be carefully considered to ensure that it is appropriate and meets regulations
- ▶ Higher education is especially prone to siloed data sources that can be challenging to integrate effectively

3. Dynamic & proactive

The days of reactive search are over. Your site search solution should be dynamic and proactive, providing unique experiences for users before they even enter a keystroke. Like Netflix or Amazon, dynamic pages utilize search systems to understand a user's likely next step and surface recommended content.

Modern search solutions should work seamlessly behind the scenes, dynamically composing content most relevant to each user. This might include recommending similar pages, courses or materials related to a user's interests, or up-weighting content and search results that are deemed more relevant.

From proactive landing pages with search-powered content to advertisements, course recommendations and functional messages in search results, your search platform should provide a personalized experience that exceeds the expectations of your most demanding users.

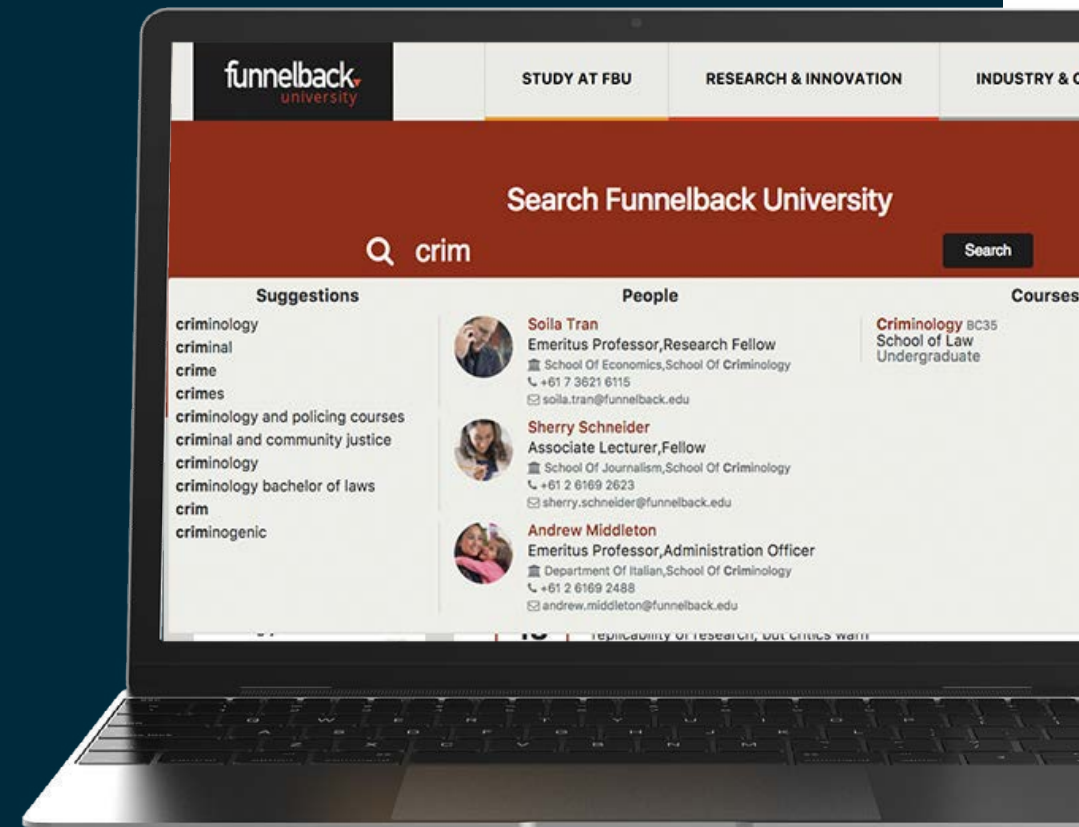


Summary

Study after study has shown a correlation between effective site search and an increase in conversions, user satisfaction and a streamlined user experience. As higher education leaders look for new ways to grow quality student applicants and combat the challenge of siloed data, site search has proven a reliable and robust part of the solution.

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 in higher education at: www.funnelback.com/he



Checklist: your site search

Whether you're examining your current site search solution, comparing vendors, or analyzing user experience (UX) across your digital properties, this checklist will ensure that you don't miss any valuable opportunities in your search solution.

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, 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 user personas and silos and provides access to all relevant data.	
2. Speak to everyone Do you speak Gen Z? Are there any differences, ambiguous phrases, industry jargon or confusing words that your users might prefer?	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 institutional 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. Localize content Your site search should reflect your other content, with localization for out-of-state or international prospects and students.	Site search should respond to the known identity of the searcher, providing, for example, only relevant information for international students to a visitor in Paris.	
6. Understand 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.	
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.	

CHECKLIST: YOUR SITE SEARCH

Feature	Requirements	Notes for your website
8. Get personal Use your search engine for more than information retrieval. A true insight engine allows you to personalize 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, incorporating information from your marketing technology solutions.	
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, recommendations or auto-complete.	

Get in touch

Get the insights and tools
essential for success

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