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Building on belief

# Taxonomy strategies help improve web performance

# Abstract

Web marketing is increasingly about making your website useful to a visitor. Design led and outside-in approaches increase the value of a website. The more that you attempt to use persona-based design processes or move to customization for individual users, the more important it is that you have the ability to classify, retrieve and present individual web pages.

The idea behind a taxonomy is to classify web pages so that you can manage their use. Taxonomy classifications are important tools for managing a large website. Over time, taxonomies tend to become obsolete and less useful. Six strategies for taxonomy updating are suggested:

1. Updating every page (the default assumption for many people)
2. Focusing on important pages that receive the most attention
3. Classifying taxonomy based on customer-profitability
4. Classifying taxonomy based on popularity
5. Tracking use of pages through machine learning approaches
6. Mapping user journey (sequential pages in a user visit are tracked)

# Introduction

If you run a large website, you need to decide what content you wish to present to visitors that holds their interest or provides the information they want.  Avoiding the problem of having an enormous website with hard to find solutions should pay off in higher sales and customer satisfaction. Taxonomies can be effective tools to organize content based on similar topics, making related content easier to find.

An important issue in a taxonomy is the distinction between categories and tags. Categories group content into buckets on the basis of being a member of similar type of page. Taxonomy tags are used to map relationships between pages. So, you might categorize a group of pages as belonging to a ‘blog’, but you would use a taxonomy tag to indicate topics within a page, for example, COVID-19 vaccination.

But most companies’ taxonomies get out of date quickly. Acquiring other companies (and their content) makes taxonomies decreasingly useful as time goes on. The more you pursue a persona-based strategy or attempt to customize content, the larger the problem.

# Updating every page

The simple-minded solution is to classify each page individually. Assuming you have an agreed set of classifications, this approach is straightforward. But, in reality, getting a consistent set of classifications is quite difficult. A utility that spins out its retail operations may run into difficulties. Acquisitions almost always lead to disagreements about how to categorize pages. A taxonomy exercise becomes an iterative exercise, which requires time and resources. A first pass on taxonomy development may have to be iterated based on examining page performance.

# Updating the most important pages

A more strategic approach to updating your taxonomy is to classify the pages as per their importance to the audience visiting the pages, as measured by visits or time spent on page. Focusing your taxonomy efforts on the most popular pages will lead to the fastest improvement in page finding. This approach streamlines the taxonomy process, but we can take the idea further.

# Customer profitability driven pages

A more subtle approach is to look at the overall profitability to the enterprise from individual customers and focus on the pages they visit most. Many banks for example, classify their customers by total relationship profitability. As a general rule, many companies find that 20% or so of their customers account for most of their profitability, for example, in the 220% range. The balance of customers is unprofitable. Profitability-driven taxonomy use can potentially allow for faster upgrades in performance.

Focusing your taxonomy upgrade on profitability should help retain your important customers with minimal effort. Just as importantly, knowing which customers are not profitable gives a company the option of:

1. Developing content that will encourage unprofitable customers to become profitable; or,

2. Getting rid of unprofitable customers.

Banking organizations such as Chase, which have performed such work, have been successful in increasing the percentage of individually profitable customers.

# Popularity and machine learning

Large websites often don’t use the data that they can collect about popularity. Traditionally, creating a stack of content, organized with the top item being the most popular (with decreasingly popular terms beneath), is a common approach. Today, popularity, particularly when combined with machine learning, allows for tailoring of content to increase customer satisfaction. The combination of popularity and customer interest is, in effect, the creation of a saliency index for pushing content to visitors.

Rather than expecting customers to wander around a large website or be sophisticated in their use of search, pushing popular items may have relevance for some websites.

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# Customer journeys and outside-in approaches

The best websites enable customers or prototype users (often called personas) to achieve their goals easily and quickly. A common architecture approach is often called a design-led or outside-in approach. The content should make it easier for a persona to achieve in his interaction goals.

The idea is to shorten the amount of time a visitor spends finding a product or solving a problem. The issue it raises for a taxonomy is how do the various pieces in the taxonomy support a customer journey. Being able to map a customer journey and look at the taxonomy classification for each page in the journey may reveal areas of interest for marketers or areas of problems for web designers.

This use of a taxonomy can be helpful in decisions about search engine optimization (SEO) marketing. If particular persona-based journey is proving popular, then it may suggest an SEO strategy. Particular tags in the user journey may be available at lower cost in SEO marketing. However, it is worth pointing out that careful use of content that avoids stuffing the web page with key words is likely to be best received by Google.

In an ideal world, a piece of content, classified using a taxonomy, should be mapped to the content that is part of a user journey (and even tracked with machine learning). When tracked in a database and combined with visit data (that is, how long customers spend on pages before bouncing out), this type of mapping is an excellent fit with a network database such as Neo4j. A network database is an excellent way of mapping pages, tags, categories and performance data because it allows for relatively unlimited mapping of pages (nodes) and customer travel between pages (links).

The use of a network database is one example of marketing technology or martech that can be an important part of measuring the success of your web content. It can be used to track changes in brand attributes, upselling, or increased close rates. These changes can be mapped to marketing goals, customer success in achieving goals, revenues, or profitability.

# Going forward

Taxonomies tend to age poorly when not maintained. Refreshing them with the techniques listed here is part of an ongoing process of maintaining your website. Like most aspects of web development, a continuing attention to the website is part of the optimization and revenue maximization process.

The goal is always to have a current set of taxonomy tags, whose existence is justified by data on the performance of the website. For less advanced websites, persona performance may be useful. For more advanced websites, individually customized content delivery may increase the company’s ability to improve performance.

A failure to manage the classification of pages is likely to make a web developer’s job more difficult and make it harder to improve revenue yield and customer satisfaction.

# About the authors

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With more than 20 years' experience in marketing consulting, Alistair advises companies across sectors on their go-to-market strategy. He has also developed websites and content marketing programs. Alistair has authored seven books on strategy, information technology, agile software development, software startups, and innovation. He has also taught strategy, international strategy, and innovation at the MB and executive level. Alistair has an MBA from Harvard University.

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Corporate Marketing | Design Services | M | 09 | 21