

E-COMMERCE

Keyword: Practical

PicoSearch gives **small e-tailers** broad capabilities

BY KAREN M. KROLL

Effective search capabilities are critical for e-tailers. According to JupiterResearch, the ability to drill down on site search results is the feature online shoppers most frequently cite as being helpful in making purchasing decisions.

The Mary Engelbreit e-commerce site, for instance, has more than 2,700 pages; that's clearly more than most customers are willing to peruse. Using site search makes it much easier for customers to find what they're looking for within a reasonable number of clicks.

"If they have to do more than three clicks, people tend to go away," says Bill Millikin, president and CEO of St. Louis-based Millikins, which manages direct-to-consumer businesses for brands such as Mary Engelbreit and Debbie Mumm.

Before starting his own company in 2002, Millikin was director of IT for Mary Engelbreit. Recognizing the importance of an effective site-search function, he adopted the application offered by Cambridge, Mass.-based PicoSearch.

PicoSearch is geared to small- and medium-sized businesses in need of a search application that is quick to install, easy to use and affordable. It is a hosted solution, which provides several advantages to retailers. Among them is the fact that its search engine "sees" the information on the site from the perspective of the Internet — just as site visitors will.

Inverted index

PicoSearch indexes the information on the site, starting at the home page and following the links within the site to arrive at a particular product or piece of information. The application then creates what's known as an "inverted index": Rather than return a list of URLs that contain the search keywords, it creates a list of keywords and the pages that contain them. The application can search and index web pages created in a variety of formats, including HTML, PDF and MS Word.

Millikin was particularly attracted to the customizable template feature, which allows him to configure search results to have the same "look" as the other pages on

the site. He also needed a search tool that would work across multiple websites (due to server configuration, the main website for Mary Engelbreit is www.maryengelbreit.com, while its online store is shop.maryengelbreit.com).

PicoSearch's engine also is capable of indexing websites that are linked to the e-tailer's site, and the application allows the retailer to "eliminate extraneous information," such as the detail pages of a large PowerPoint presentation.

The application supports advanced searches, such as Boolean searches, in which the user can include terms like "and" or "not" to limit the scope of the search. For instance, a user specifically searching for wool sweaters can enter "sweater AND wool NOT cotton."

e-Mail alert

The PicoSearch engine also alerts the retailer when its site appears significantly changed. During one indexing session on the Mary Engelbreit site, for instance, the engine found half as many pages as it normally would. The application sent an e-mail to Millikin, "and we found a mistake on the server," he says.

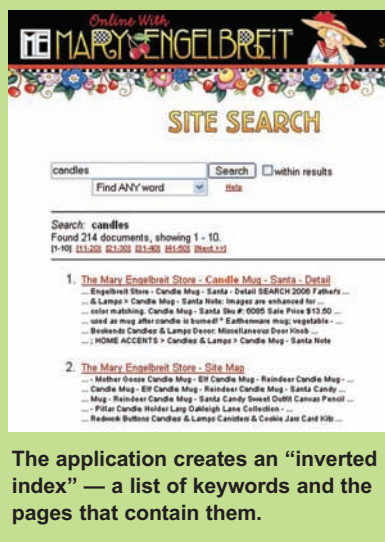
Another useful feature is the promotions function, which allows a retailer to ensure that a particular page or group of pages — those highlighting a sale, for instance — are ranked more highly than they otherwise would be.

PicoSearch offers a range of reporting capabilities. Among the most valuable are those that show retailers what customers have been searching for, what they've found and, equally important, what they haven't been able to find. The reports also can show the most popular search terms.

The annual fee for the professional version of PicoSearch, which can index up to 3,000 pages, is \$250. The premium version runs \$500 annually, and is able to index up to 6,000 pages.

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