A CONVERGENCE OF CHANNELS

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THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL, SEO & LOCAL

Introduction

The lines between social, local and search are no longer blurring. They are disappearing.

These aspects of digital marketing could previously be treated as independent services, each operating in isolation.
Not anymore.

With recent shifts in the digital landscape including integration of Google+ recommendations in search results, Google+ Local pages, location-based check-in services and social signals driving search algorithms, it's becoming more and more imperative to optimize the intersections between these channels in order to increase findability and performance for brands. With proper research and planning, brands have the opportunity to utilize content and calls to action to proactively inform, support and shape the buyer's journey through many channels. To illustrate the changing landscape, we will provide digital marketing strategy for Finnish home goods super giant SOHVA (so-fa) and follow one consumer through the path to purchase, moving from interest to research, recommendation to validation and finally, decision.

Meet Nikki VonRickenbacker.

She recently moved to Denver and is in the market for a wide variety of home goods. Nikki enjoys minimalist design, tamales and her cat, Sir Wigglesworth. She spends a lot of her time on the internet; she does a majority of her consumer research online prior to going to a store and she's active on Facebook, Pinterest and Twitter. Like so many of us, Nikki's got a minor addiction to her phone and uses it constantly to connect with friends and look up reviews and directions. Nikki's preferred search engine is Google since the search giant holds 80 percent[1] of the market share. We will use Google for examples, but the principles laid out apply to all of the major engines.

Let's get started.

Top 10 Tips for Decorating Your Home

Interest

Nikki's path to purchase begins with an interest in ideas and solutions that meet her needs.

She starts by searching "home decorating tips" in Google. A post titled "Top 10 Tips for Decorating a New Home" on SOHVA's blog appears on the results page with a line below it stating Nikki's friend shared this article on Google+. Nikki is signed in to her Google account and her search results are set to "Show Personal Results." Since the Search Plus Your World[2] update, this means the results returned for her query will be based on her contacts as well as general results. In a typical, non-personalized search the SOHVA blog post may have ranked on Page 10. However, since Nikki's Google+ contact shared this post, it appears third on Page 1. Seeing her friend liked the article encourages her to choose this link from the entire results page.

This is a perfect example of these channels working together: excellent content gets shared socially, which boosts search ranking in personalized results, which increases organic traffic to the site and ultimately results in greater profit.

The marketers working with SOHVA performed many techniques to allow this connection to occur. First, they worked with SOHVA to develop content for the company blog. This content is not randomly generated. "Top 10 Tips for Decorating a New Home" was created with the knowledge that online readers enjoy list formats (they are easy to consume and remember) and "decorating a new home" was proven to be a top-performing keyphrase in paid search. Google has indicated in blog posts[3] and algorithm updates that fresh, unique and relevant content is a major factor in organic search ranking. Developing and executing a content strategy allows brands to not only improve search ranking, but also develop relationships and connections with consumers through social media sharing.

A search engine optimization (SEO) specialist at the agency completed extensive keyword research for SOHVA along with research into successful content competitors had posted. Search phrases like Nikki's "home decorating tips" are often uncovered for clients through paid search efforts during this keyword research stage. This information was used to create a content calendar based on desirable keywords and popular topics. The "10 Tips for Decorating a New Home" post was informative, helpful and fun, encouraging Nikki's friend to share it with her circles. If she had not shared it, it is unlikely Nikki would have seen it in her initial research. The marketers also utilized Google+ as an active "push" tool for their content. They posted this blog on SOHVA's Google+ Page, sharing it with all the people who have SOHVA in their circles. This was in addition to posting it to Facebook and tweeting it.

Thanks to new updates in Google Webmaster Tools, agency analysts can see how the SOHVA content is being shared on Google+[4]. This insight is shared with the SEO and social teams and they reimagine this blog post into a series of tweets (including relevant keywords and hashtags), an infographic and more "Top 10" lists for the blog calendar, effectively using analytics data to inform content choices.

Tips:

1 When optimizing content for organic ranking (whether in the normal results or in the Google+ results) make sure that your key search phrase appears in the URL, title tag and h1 tag and variations are used appropriately within the content.

2 Add social sharing buttons at all relevant touch points, specifically on blog posts and content pieces. Tag these buttons for analytics tracking.

3 Consider 10 different forms each single content piece can take.

Research

Nikki moves from a passing interest in home furnishings to actively researching the items she needs.

She enters "area rugs" into a search bar. A pay-per-click (PPC) ad appears on the page featuring a 10 percent discount and free shipping for SOHVA rugs. She clicks through and interacts with a landing page specifically for area rugs. She browses the choices and mentally notes a few favorites before returning to her search.

The agency put many resources into managing SOHVA's national PPC campaign to maximize the budget and develop comprehensive keyword lists. Using Google AdWords Keyword Tool the agency identified "area rugs" as a search term with high search volume and low competition. An ad group was built around the term. Multivariate testing showed "free shipping" and discount offers were most effective in increasing the click through rate of SOHVA's PPC ads. Analytics determined searchers coming to the general SOHVA landing page from these ads had a high bounce rate,

so two landing pages were developed to feature area rugs.

The new landing pages were put through Google Content Experiments (formerly, Google Website Optimizer[5]) to maximize performance, based on insights from heat mapping tools. The landing page featuring an image of the rugs in a household setting performed much better than the page featuring rugs in an office setting. The office setting landing page was scrapped in favor of the household version, which helped drive more conversions.

If the search query was geo-modified with "decorative area rugs Denver" or had local intent like "decorative area rugs store, 80203" the ad would have had location extensions and would lead to a location-specific landing page.

Still in research mode, Nikki searches "affordable couch." The SOHVA site appears first on the organic search results page. The result preview includes the terms "sofas" and "couches." At this point Nikki recognizes the SOHVA brand is appearing frequently in response to her needs. She clicks through to the couches category page, checks out the options and notes some possible choices.

Many channels and strategies went into SOHVA scoring that #1 ranking in the un-branded organic search results. Organic search ranking used to be the domain of the SEO department alone. Today it is a result of social media indicators, paid search keyword knowledge, rich content and traditional SEO tactics. To achieve this ranking, web analysts tracked impressions versus click through rates for organic keywords and identified ideal keywords to target. These keywords were then inserted into the site's title tags, META descriptions, URLs and various on-page elements. Digital outreach efforts were performed, encouraging bloggers to post relevant articles or guest blog posts ghost written by the agency about home goods or decoration that linked back to SOHVA's site using specific keywords. Search engines see legitimate external links favorably, helping to boost ranking.

Executing a content strategy on the blog builds unique and fresh content for the site and increases social sharing, also improving ranking. There are indicators that search algorithms have begun to take social signals such as number of tweets or Likes into account in determining results[6]. As stated before, if an individual is logged in to his or her Google account personalized results appear, showing content that may not have ranked at all in a non-personalized search. All of these factors played a role in Nikki finding SOHVA as the first result for her "affordable couch" query.

Nikki is excited enough about SOHVA's products she next conducts a search for the nearest store. Typing in "SOHVA Denver" brings up a map listing for a location near her Denver home. Nikki notices there are reviews associated with the Google map listing and clicks through to the local map listing page (now a Google+ Local page as of May 2012[7]) for this location.

Google+ Local pages are another illustrative example of how social, local and search are coming together. On May 30, 2012, Google automatically turned Place pages into Google+ Local pages, increasing potential for search engine visibility and creating opportunities for engagement with local customers. Customers can now find local businesses through a search directly on Google, in the Maps section or from the new local tab in Google+, which incorporates personalized results from the user's circles.

Nikki notices there are reviews associated with the Google map listing and clicks through to the Google+ Local page.
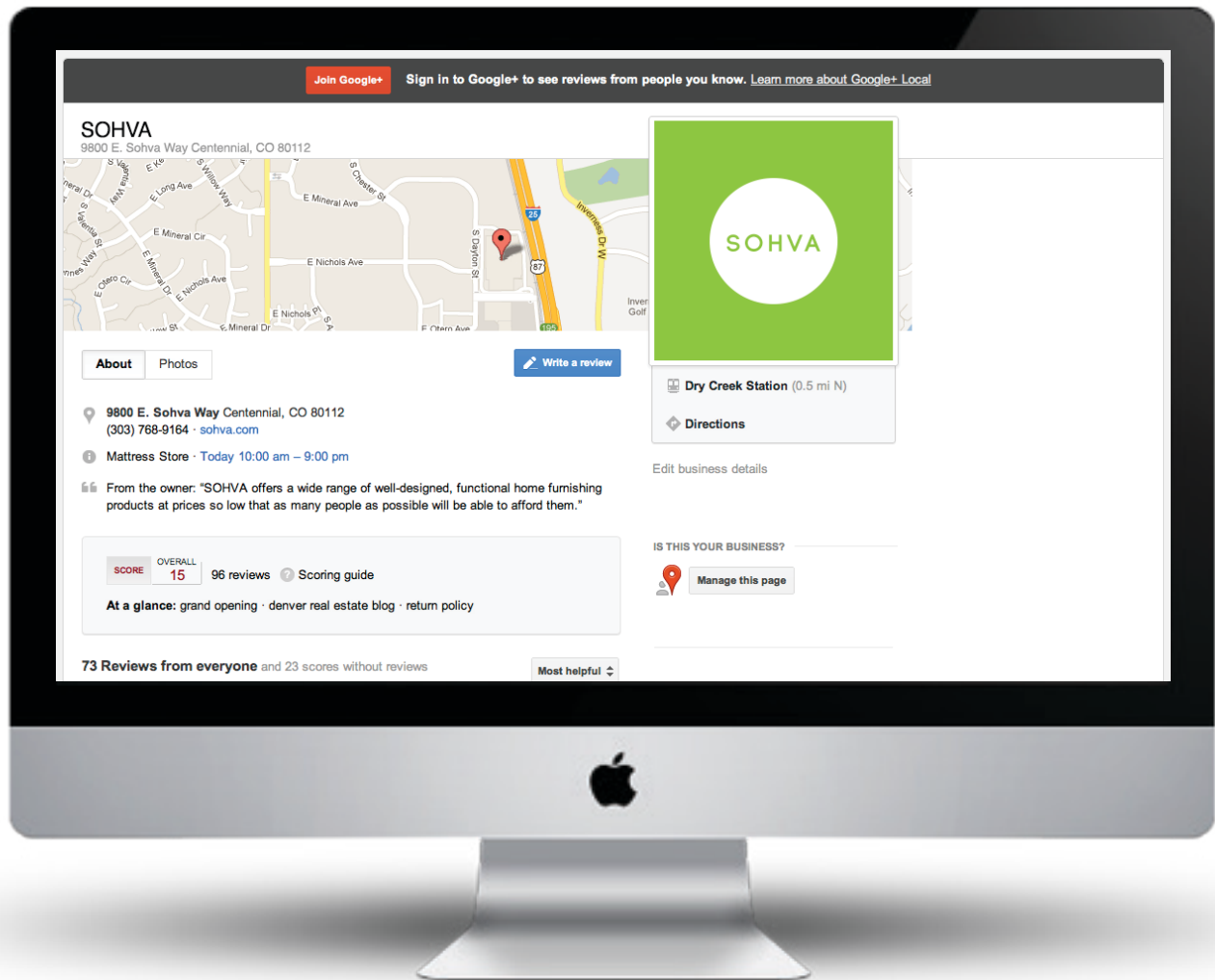
In addition, Google released an update known as "Venice" in February 2012[8]. This change is meant to improve the triggering of Local Universal results by relying more on the ranking of the main search results as a signal. Local Universal results are the search engine results that blend map listing results. Since this change Google map listings and Google+ Local pages (generally in the top two positions on the results page) are getting their business names replaced by the title tag from the website creating what is known as blended results. Industry experts theorize[9] that in order to reach the top spot in the Local Universal results, companies will have to rank in the top spot for SEO as well.

SOHVA's marketing agency will have optimized the Google+ Local pages in a number of ways to increase search engine ranking. First, they will have had SOHVA claim and verify the page to ensure no one else can alter the page. They would then insert keywords identified in SEO research into descriptions and select the appropriate Categories. Social extensions would be added along with rich content such as store and product photos or videos. Once the Google+ Local page was well established, the analysts monitor where the driving directions requests came from in order to ensure the listing was targeting the correct keywords and locations. It is still commonly believed that new Google+ Local pages utilize relevance indicators such as citations, much like Google Place Pages did in the past. These indicators help Google to recognize a repetition of identical location information such as name, address and phone number (NAP) for this particular store location. This allows Google to consider this SOHVA location more accurate and therefore potentially more relevant than other competitor locations. These redundancies of the NAP exist for SOHVA because the marketing agency proactively generated location instances across all the local search sources that Google uses to establish relevance (such as Citysearch, Yellow Pages, Bing Local and others).

All of these optimizations helped increase SOHVA's Google+ Local page ranking for an unbranded search such as "Denver couches" and improved user experience for searchers looking for the nearest store location.

Tips:

1 Zip code, city, or DMA targeting is a great way to maximize your PPC budget. Use your point of sale data to target campaigns based on sales.

2 PPC ad extensions can instantly increase your ad real estate and click through rate.

3 Because of recent changes to Google's algorithm (notably the Penguin update that launched in April 2012) be careful when using keywords in the anchor text of links. It is still important to do so to show the site's relevancy for those keywords, but over-utilizing the same anchor text can appear as "unnatural" and cause red flags to the Google crawlers, possibly incurring penalties.

4 Use United States Postal Service-approved addresses when submitting your location listings to directories and Internet Yellow Pages (IYPs) for consistent, findable data.

5 Follow each engine, directory and IYP's guidelines to ensure the most successful results from your location listings.

6 Establish relationships with influential bloggers and social media users to secure backlinks and leverage their social networks.

Recommendation

Within this phase there are two separate kinds of recommendation: active and passive recommendation.

The brand has more control over active recommendation, but passive recommendation can be a powerful push on the path to purchase. Brands can also help make it easier for users to passively recommend their product or service.

Active Recommendation
While Nikki is on the SOHVA Google+ Local page she sees a negative review of this location on the page, but also a thoughtful response from SOHVA.

73 Reviews from everyone and 23 scores without reviews

Jennifer Stone reviewed 2 weeks ago
Quality 2 / 3   **Appeal 0** / 3   **Service 2** / 3
This store is a nightmare. I felt like I was trapped in a maze designed by a sadistic minimalist. I wanted everything, but was able to buy nothing. Halfway through I broke down and wept on a FLOOPFLERSGAT floor cushion. Save yourselves. Save your children. Do not go here.

SOHVA replied 2 weeks ago
Oh no! We're so sorry you had a bad experience at our store. We know it can get a little overwhelming. We recommend to guests that they use the maps, paper and pencils we provide to help make the experience more streamlined. If at any point you need assistance, please locate the nearest tower with an "i" on it, and an associate should be nearby to help. Please accept our apologies, and if you would like to come back the Reindeer Meatballs are on us!

The agency monitored and responded to consumer reviews posted on the page. An unanswered negative review can be enough to persuade otherwise engaged consumers to take their business elsewhere. But a negative review that has a timely response from the brand can convert even more effectively into sales than positive ones, according to some research[10]. The main explanation for this phenomenon is trust. Consumers have more faith in a brand that is transparent enough to provide honest feedback and therefore more likely to give them business. The purpose of review monitoring is to provide a response from the company that addresses the customer's concerns and assures potential customers that the business is responsive, caring and engaged.

Nikki sees the negative review and appreciates that SOHVA was responsive to this complaint. She wants to see if there are many other complaints about the company, so she spends time on other social review sites such as Yelp. She sees many positive reviews, and only a handful of bad ones. She discounts the negative opinions in light of the high number of positive ones, and SOHVA's thoughtful response to the consumer who had an issue.

Active recommendation can also come in the form of display retargeting. Remember when Nikki landed on the paid search landing page and clicked around on a few pages, but didn't purchase anything? The agency tracked her activity through cookie data, gathering information on her site activity and noting her interests in order to "remarket" these items to Nikki through display ads. Two weeks after visiting the landing pages, Nikki is surfing around on her favorite site, CatsandTamales.com, when an ad featuring the very same the luxurious GANGËLDOPPEN shag rug she viewed appears in the right sidebar, reminding her she still needs to buy a rug.

Passive Recommendation
A few days after her home furnishings research, Nikki is scanning her Facebook News Feed. She sees her friend posted about entering an SOHVA contest for a free couch. Even though she is not actively searching for home goods at the moment, Nikki is intrigued and decides to visit the SOHVA Facebook page to enter the contest.

This kind of passive recommendation may seem like a coincidence, but it is actually the result of a comprehensive strategy for increasing social engagement for SOHVA. As part of this strategy, the agency developed a Facebook Contest App and promoted the contest through Facebook ads. These ads took advantage of Facebook's excellent targeting capabilities to reach such specific audiences as: mothers, women aged 25-45, friends of SOHVA fans, fans of competitors, engaged less than 1 year, expecting parents, newlyweds, people that recently moved, people with young children, people that like home improvement TV (but not necessarily Home Improvement), Home & Garden

broad interests and specific home improvement interests. The agency utilized Facebook Advertising analytics and Page Insights to monitor and optimize the campaign, and Google's new social reporting suite[11] to evaluate continued engagement on the site.

Tips:

1 Monitor the web and customer review sites for brand terms; respond to both positive and negative comments to improve customer support and increase trust in brand.

2 Leverage built-in amplification features of social networks by running contests or promotions through these channels.

3 Utilize tools offered by social networks and Google to measure performance of social campaigns.

Validation

At this point Nikki is leaning heavily towards purchasing most of her home goods from SOHVA.

She begins to narrow down her wish list to a handful of essentials she is seriously considering. On Nikki's long train ride to work she passes the time on her phone by using SOHVA's mobile site to browse, place items in her shopping cart and play with Pinterest. She looks at SOHVA's account on Pinterest and "pins" the top choices to her "New House Ideas" board. A friend repins one of them onto her own board and another comments, "Love the KÄMÖSKERLOP couch! I can totally see us watching movies on that one." Nikki has her Pinterest account set up to automatically update Facebook and Twitter when she pins items. Four Facebook friends Like the couch and another friend tweets her back, "Love the couch, let me know if you go to #SOHVA, I'll come check it out." Nikki appreciates the endorsements from her friends and becomes more confident in actually purchasing these pieces.

The internet has changed many aspects of the shopping experience, but some human traits remain universal online and off. According to *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping* by retail research expert Paco Underhill "…when two women shop together, they often spend more time and money than women alone." Shopping is a social experience for many, whether it is physically pushing through the racks together or getting friend's input through a Like on Facebook. Sixty-eight percent of consumers with Facebook accounts say a positive referral from a Facebook friend would make them more likely to buy from or visit a retailer, according to a study by research and consulting firm Morpace Inc[12].

Knowing this, SOHVA's agency added Like and "Pin It" buttons to each of their product pages to encourage the kind of engagement and validation Nikki is experiencing through multiple channels. A company adding Pin It buttons to their own products also lets users know they are allowed to pin images without any of the copyright issues that have plagued Pinterest[13]. The agency also developed and actively managed a Pinterest account that pins the company's own goods, along with images of interior design and unique product uses. Users repin many of these images and comment on them. The agency actively manages the

account, responding to questions and following frequent Pinners back.

The Facebook-Pinterest integration only allows users to sync their Pinterest account with their personal Facebook account, so brands have no control over this part of the path. However, the additional free exposure on Facebook should further encourage brands to engage with Pinterest.

The agency's active social media management caught the #SOHVA hashtag use in Nikki's friend's tweet. The social media manager tweeted back to both:

> **Hey @NikkiVonR & @NikkisBud, if you go to #SOHVA in the next 10 days download this 10% off coupon! bit.ly/SOHVA**

The link is tracked with Google Analytics so the agency can quantify the response from active Twitter engagement, and the coupon is POS coded to track the number of coupons actually redeemed.

They also placed Google Analytics event tracking on the Pin It buttons so statistics showing the most-shared products

are available. This data can be used in a variety of ways: those products can be selected for more in-depth content pieces, featured in paid search as text or even given a more prominent display in-store, as just a few examples. These actions are also tracked as a signal of intent, to help measure which advertising campaigns drove the most pins.

Tips:

1 Jump on emerging social platforms and features to increase awareness, create new ways to engage and provide additional value for customers.

2 Actively monitor the web for both brand terms and relevant unbranded phrases. Include Twitter hashtags in this monitoring.

3 Use unique discount codes in social media to track performance and correctly attribute success.

Decision

Nikki finally reaches a decision: she's going to SOHVA. Took you long enough, Nikki.

When she arrives at the store she checks in to the location on Facebook Places and Foursquare. A notification pops up on Foursquare that informs her if she checks into this SOHVA three times she receives a free plate of Reindeer Meatballs in the cafeteria. Once inside the store Nikki pulls up SOHVA's mobile website to remind herself what she put in her shopping cart. Soon the KÄMÖSKERLOP couch will be hers! Upon checkout she uses the discount coupon she downloaded from the tweet, and agrees to provide some personal information, such as email and zip code.

The agency optimized the SOHVA mobile site to be easy and efficient for customers to use on-the-go and while actually in the store. Many of the optimizations came from analytics data including heat mapping and click tracking that showed customers being frustrated with the site's mobile interface prior to optimization. This data led the agency to streamline the mobile site, reducing the navigation to simple menus

and selecting only the highest-converting images to increase load time.

The coupon Nikki downloaded from Twitter has a distinct code that is tied back to the campaign. This allows the agency to connect online and offline actions, and provides a concrete return on investment for social media management.

They also created Foursquare specials as part of a social and local initiative. Customers are encouraged to check-in to the location with rewards for a certain number of check-ins. Since Nikki has her social media accounts linked and shared, this puts the SOHVA brand in Nikki's friend's Facebook and Twitter feeds once again. Foursquare and other location-based check-in services are another example of how social, local and in this case mobile, are coming together. Brands have new opportunities to connect with consumers while they are on-the-go and influence decisions.

For example, Nikki may decide to grab a drink after her shopping extravaganza. She uses the Explore function to search for a bar on Foursquare and sees two of her friends are checked in to a nearby Buffalo Wild Wings and two of her other friends are checked into a Yard House a little further away. Yard House employed an integrated strategy for local and social, providing a discount incentive of a free appetizer for first time check-ins. Nikki chooses to meet these friends instead because of the incentive.

Tips:

1 Manage venue data on Facebook Places and Foursquare to ensure accuracy and allow users to check in and share with ease.

2 Run Specials on Facebook Places and Foursquare to encourage repeat in-store visits and sharing.

3 Optimize mobile sites to make them easy to navigate, quick to load and conversion-oriented with action buttons in the top navigation.

Beyond the Decision

Nikki's home goods are purchased. But the path doesn't end here.

Using the contact information provided at the point of purchase, SOHVA sent a link to an electronic survey regarding Nikki's experience with the company. There is a 20 percent off coupon as an incentive to complete the survey. Nikki takes SOHVA up on the option to increase the percent off to 30 percent if she shares this survey with five family and friends who have been to the store via email or SMS text.

Just days after the survey, however, Nikki runs into a big problem with her purchase. She absolutely can't make sense of the Finnish assembly instructions for her storage cabinet. After hours of frustration, she tweets "#SOHVA your instructions suck!" This could have a very negative impact on all Nikki's friends who have been positively influenced by her good experience with SOHVA up to this point. The social media team picks up the tweet and replies:

@NikkiVonR Sorry you are frustrated. Check out our instructions bit.ly/SOHVA or call us at 800-123-4567 and we'll help!

The agency encouraged SOHVA to develop a system to extend Nikki's experience beyond the initial purchase, developing the relationship further and encouraging her to become a lifelong customer and brand advocate. Data gathered from consumer surveys provides valuable lessons for both online campaign optimization and in-store customer service. Encouraging Nikki to share the survey also places another brand touchpoint in her friend's lives, whether or not they fill it out.

After identifying assembly issues as a major consumer pain point, the marketing agency stepped up the content surrounding product instructions. This section of the company website features a searchable database of instructions to download, an FAQ section and instructional videos. The videos receive a huge number of views, showing that consumers find watching assembly instructions much more helpful than trying to read schematics. In the months following the posting of the videos, SOHVA noticed another positive benefit to the content: calls to the customer service number dropped, reducing their call center expenses. The addition of more rich content (including many videos) to the SOHVA site also helped boost organic search ranking.

Tips:

1 Run social couponing campaigns to encourage personal recommendations among close family and friends.

2 Actively respond to customer support issues via social media channels.

3 Use insights gained from customer feedback, social monitoring and existing content performance to develop new content.

In Summary

Nikki's path to purchase demonstrates the complexity of today's digital marketing landscape. No one solution or strategy brought her into the store to make a purchase. Instead, helpful content was shared socially, boosting search ranking and increasing organic traffic to the site. Analytics recommendations informed PPC campaigns, which in turn generated keywords for SEO. Local listing and social management engaged with consumers in multiple channels, promoting the brand's values across many touch points.

As Google and other engines continue to make changes that promote the shift towards integrating social, local and search, digital marketers must continue to map the path and provide brands the optimal opportunities to be found online.

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About Us

Location3 Media partners with national brands to increase their findability and performance across all digital platforms. By leveraging elite certifications and industry-leading experience, we help companies create efficient and effective online marketing campaigns that fit our clients' needs and deliver results. Location3 provides local digital marketing solutions to over 100,000 multi-unit retail and franchise locations nationwide. In April 2011, Location3 was named a Google Analytics Certified Partner, making us only the 31st agency in the world to be both a GACP and Google Website Optimizer Certified at that time.

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