Building Retail Website Taxonomies
Not as Easy as it Seems

Heather Hedden
Senior Taxonomy Analyst, PPC

American Society for Indexing Annual Meeting
April 30, 2011, Providence, Rhode Island
Introduction to Retail Taxonomies

Characteristics of general retail/ecommerce taxonomies

- Separate hierarchy for each product category or department
  - Typically 5 – 20 hierarchies/top terms
  - Typically 3 – 20 terms/categories per level
- Simple hierarchy, with no nonpreferred terms
- Hierarchy depth typically of 3-5 levels
- Facets may exist at lower levels of the hierarchy.
- Related terms (See also relationships) may/may not exist.
- Ordering is not always alphabetical (rather popular or logical).
Introduction: Hierarchies
Introduction: Facets

- Facets are for narrowing categories that are similar and support the same kinds of attributes.
- Facets work well for (retail) products that are sufficiently similar: all shoes, all luggage, all laptop computers.
- Facets may be:
  - the only type of taxonomy on a specialized retail site, or
  - appear at lower (more specific levels) of a general retail site.
Introduction: Facets

Search Women's Shoes

- Any Brand
- Any Type
- Any Category

- Above the Ankle Boots
- Active Sandals
- Adjustable Strap Shoes
- Aerobic Shoes
- After Sport Sandals
- Airport Friendly Boots
- Alligator Shoes
- Amphibious Sandals
- Animal Print Shoes
- Animal Slippers
- Ankle Boots
- Ankle Strap Sandals
- Ankle Straps
- Approach Shoes
- Après Ski Boots
- Aqua Socks
- Athletic Accessories
- Athletic Shoes
- Backless Sneakers

Search Men's Shoes

- adidas Shoes
- Athletic
- Sneakers
- 10
- Regular
- Black
- Any Country
- $65 - $100

Search Children's Shoes

- Any Brand
- Any Type
- Any Category
- Any Size
- Any Width
- Any Color
- Any Country
- Any Price

Search:

- Spirit
- Comfort
- Stein
- Blain & Murphy
- Mephisto
- Merrell
- Minnetonka
- Naturalizer
- New Balance
- Propet
- PUMA
- Reebok
- Rockport
- Saucony
- Skechers
- Softspots
- Sperry Top-Sider
- Stride Rite
- Stuart Weitzman
- Timberland
Retail Taxonomy Challenges

- Different categorization methods and category cross-overs
- Whether to sort alphabetically or not
- Web site vs. physical store organization
- Business needs vs. taxonomy standards/best practices
Challenges: Categorization and Cross-Overs

Examples:
- Women’s Shoes – in Women’s Clothing; in Shoes
- Office Furniture – in Office Products; in Furniture

Cross-over product examples:
- Home Theater – in TV/Video; in Audio/Stereo
- Smartphones – in Cell Phones; in PDAs
- Printer-Scanner-Faxes – in Printers; in Scanners; in Fax Machines

Other categorization challenges
- Music and Movies media separate or in with players/equipment
- Video Games in Toys & Games or in Electronics
Challenges: Categorization and Cross-Overs

Put in both locations – *Polyhierarchies*

OK, but…

- Too much polyhierarchy confuses the tree structure. Polyhierarchies work better for specific terms/categories at the lowest level or second-lowest with small sub-hierarchies, (e.g. Fitness GPS Watches in GPS Systems, in Portable Fitness Electronics, and in Watches), not large hierarchy branches.

- Systems may not fully support polyhierarchy, with breadcrumb trail reflecting a fixed path, not dynamic, not always the user’s path.
Breadcrumb trail may not reflecting the user’s navigation path down the hierarchy, but rather only the other, one fixed hierarchy, path of the polyhierarchy.
Challenges: Display Order Choice

Could be alphabetical or could be “logical”
Challenge: Comparing with Physical Stores

There may be a push to organize the product taxonomy in conformity with store layout and organization.

• Loyal customers might understand it.
• But are customers divided by store loyalty or by physical storer vs. online shoppers?

Factors may be unique to physical stores:
• Newest/hottest products at the entrance
• Small accessories in the checkout lines
• Larger items in the back
• Use of aisle endcaps for featured items
• Creative use of physical space
Challenge: Business Needs vs. Best Practices

Possible taxonomy requests for “business needs” that challenge taxonomy standards or best practices:

• Placing accessories, services, or other related products in the position of narrower terms
• Creating new top level categories for relatively small, hot categories, that belong under existing top categories
• Creating multiple polyhierarchies for a product category to help promote it
• Creating intermediate level categories to group and promote subcategories, not serve navigation
Solution to taxonomy requests for “business needs” that challenge taxonomy standards or best practices:

- Create more than one navigation path
  1. Accurate hierarchies (such as in lefthand margin)
  2. Promotional categories (in central space)
Challenge: Business Needs vs. Best Practices

- List of next level categories may differ in the true taxonomy of the left hand navigation, compared with the central area.
Conclusions

• Simple taxonomies are not always simple to create.
• Taxonomy design may be under constraints.
• Business needs can challenge taxonomy standards.
• Creative solutions may be needed.