

Consumers may search online for 30 days, but buy close to what they found on the first day

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Given the ease of online search, consumers can explore and discover hundreds of available items in any category. Retailers and advertisers are keen to influence the search and final purchase through better product recommendations and targeted advertising. A forthcoming article in the INFORMS journal *Marketing Science* studies online search and purchase behavior of consumers in the digital camera category and finds that even though consumers may search for extended periods of time, what they purchase tends to be remarkably close to items they searched and found in their very first search.

The study conducted by Bart Bronnenberg of Tilburg University, Jun Kim of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, and Carl Mela of Duke University combine detailed consumer online browsing and [purchase](#) data for digital cameras from the online measurement firm comScore, with scraped camera product pages from the three largest online retailers (Amazon, Best Buy, and Walmart) to uncover a variety of insights about online consumer [search](#) behavior. From the browsing and purchase history of over two million consumers, they used a sample of more than 1,000 digital camera purchases with full browsing histories over a three-month period.

"People differ in their search behavior a lot; some make up their mind right away but others search for long periods - often up to a month and review many products." said Mela. The study finds that about 25 percent

of consumers search and purchase in just one online session, the average purchase takes much longer - around 15 days and over six sessions. The vast majority of purchases happen in under a month. Further, about 40 percent of consumers search only one brand and 20 percent only one model, while the average consumer will search about three brands and six models.

For marketers, a long period of search can be a great opportunity to influence the exploration and discovery of new products during search and purchase. But as Bronnenberg notes, "What surprised us was that consumers don't explore anywhere close to full range of products and attributes in the category. The final product they purchase is very close in terms of the attributes to the products they discovered on the first day." This suggests that consumers have a rough idea of the quality and type of features they want as they begin search. The search helps them merely to refine the right combination of features within the narrow range of features of the products they found on the first day.

On first glance, this finding might mean that retailers and advertisers can do little to influence the final purchase. But Kim cautions that would be the wrong conclusion. He notes, "In fact, the exact model with the right combination of features that the consumer will ultimately purchase can still be influenced up until the moment of purchase. The fact that what people buy is close to what they initially found means that ad targeting and product recommendations can use this information effectively and recommend close variants of what the consumer initially searched and found."

Concludes Mela: "Overall, we think the whole exploration and discovery angle when searching for online purchases may be overstated," but then cautions that "it is also possible, that the limited exploration we find may be due to widespread availability of online reviews for digital cameras." Reviews may have informed the [consumers](#) exploration and discovery

and the initial search outside of the search and purchase behavior that the study observes. Discovery may then be still important in categories where such reviews are less available.

More information: Bart J. Bronnenberg et al. Zooming In on Choice: How Do Consumers Search for Cameras Online?, *Marketing Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1287/mksc.2016.0977](https://doi.org/10.1287/mksc.2016.0977)

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