South African businesses missing out this Christmas

By [Luke McKend](#)

Listening to Bruce Whitfield recently on 702 Radio, I was surprised by an on-air conversation that suggested that it wasn't possible to do all of your Christmas shopping online in South Africa. I decided to find out whether this was true based on three simple tests: Could I find the product online? Was there sufficient information to help me make a buying a decision? Could I buy the product online?

The first item I searched for was a mountain bike, specifically a Specialized Rockhopper. Unfortunately not a single organic listing produced a decent commercial result and, of even more concern, in the absence of good organic content, there were no ads. Not a single one. Mountainbiking is one of the biggest sports in South Africa, and Christmas is one of the busiest periods for people selling bikes, yet there was no way for me to find out more about the product I was looking for. Failure on test no. 1 already!

Different time, different result

This seemed a little strange so I investigated further. I had run my search at about 9pm. Running the same search the following morning yielded slightly different results. Looking a bit more broadly, it seems there are a number of ad results for a more general search such as 'mountain bike'.

So what exactly is going on here? There are a few reasons why ad results will be different at different times of the day. One reason is that an advertiser's budget may simply have run out. However, the fact is that consumers continue to search for your product even when your budget has run out! Every search that takes place after your budget is exhausted is a missed opportunity to reach that customer - consumers don't stop searching for a product just because your physical store is closed. In addition, consumers are increasingly savvy. Covering only basic terms such as 'mountain bike' and using broad match strategies to capture other search phrases that include the word 'bike' or 'bicycle' are no longer good enough to satisfy increasingly sophisticated shoppers.

The upshot was that, the previous night, it was simply not possible to compare prices, find out where the closest bike shop was, or even buy the bike I was looking for online.

How much is that cushion in my window?

Having failed in my first search, I moved swiftly on to my quest for another item: a sun lounger. Searching for 'sun lounger' yielded four ads (at 11:25am). The first ad was for a large discount retailer that took me directly to their e-brochure (or .pdf download).

My next search, to follow the lounger, was for cushions. I found a basic website but there were photos, and the products looked good. I clicked the product image and a form appeared for me to request a price. So I found a product, but failed at the price comparison hurdle.

Based on this experience, I concluded that it's not easy to find what you're looking for. Retailers in South Africa are missing opportunities every time a consumer searches for their product. If you have a product and people can't find it online, they may well assume you don't have it in store. If a product is listed and there is no price, you're putting another barrier in front of your potential customer. Even if a product cannot be bought online, there is value in providing consumers with information about what they might find in your shop.

To sum up, I will have to resign myself to multiple mall trips to fill those Christmas stockings.

South African businesses are missing a huge opportunity if they are not advertising online - and even if they are advertising online, they need to make sure the shopping experience is user friendly.

ABOUT LUKE MCKEND

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