

# THE SEARS CATALOG FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: ECOMMERCE UPGRADES AT SEARS.CA

Over the past half century, Sears Canada has become one of the most iconic retail establishments in the Canadian landscape. With 122 department stores, 174 dealer stores, 48 home stores, and over 1,800 merchandise pick-up locations, it is said that 85 percent of Canadians live within a 10-minute drive of a Sears location. And with a long-standing catalog operation and growing online portal, no Canadian consumer is out of reach. Even as an uncertain holiday season approaches, Sears.ca is in the midst of a redesign that promises significant functionality enhancements and a richer user experience. Benchmark recently dialed up Sears Canada AVP of eCommerce Simon Rodrigue to learn what we can about the coming redesign, and to understand how this retail giant plans to be ready for what everyone hopes will be a successful holiday season.

**Benchmark:** Rumor has it that Sears Canada will be rolling out some important changes to its Web site sometime in the not-too-distant future. What are the objectives in doing a redesign?

**Simon Rodrigue:** For us any time we look at doing a refresh or an update, it's really about understanding how we can improve that core customer experience. At a basic level, user experience to us is delighting the customer as they move along from A to B — B being whatever reason they came to the site.

For us that really breaks down into a couple of things. One is just the basic information architecture. How easy is it for a customer to interact with the site? There's a lot of functionality — so we talk about improving the search, improving the navigation, giving customers more choices, and really allowing them to drill down and create their own experience on the Web site as they're looking for products.

The second piece is really where the delight comes in. How are you delighting your customer as they move down that journey from A to B? Are you inspiring them? Are you making them want to engage with your brand online even more in the future?

And then the third pillar is the performance perspective. So, I think traditionally people ask: how fast can someone get from A to B? That's always measured in clicks.

**Benchmark:** Those are some far-reaching objectives. And we have the busy holiday season coming up. Are you planning to roll out a major redesign before the holiday?

**Simon Rodrigue:** There are definitely major things coming in place for Q4 for the Christmas season. But as you can understand, I want to be very careful in what we say about that.

**Benchmark:** Understood. You mentioned customers creating their own experiences. How will that work?

**Simon Rodrigue:** It's really about customers choosing their own way of navigating the site. So one of the things that we truly believe in is the whole concept of guided navigation, where instead of telling customers, 'this is how we want you to browse our product catalog,' you're providing them some guidance.

So for example, if they're going into men's apparel — at that point they can really start to choose their own experience. Like, show me things in this size and then color, or show me color and then size — and mixing brand into that. So it's really allowing them to rebuild that catalog in a way that makes sense to them, which is the core piece of what guided navigation is today.

**Benchmark:** So that's the visitor's individual experience, that they can tailor to their own way of shopping. How are you engaging them beyond that?

**Simon Rodrigue:** That's the next piece — really allowing them to embed Sears.ca into their lives. So when we talk about social media or building communities, for us that really starts at the core of: how do you turn your customers into advocates and evangelists? And how do you provide them the tools to become those marketplace advocates for you to drive people to your business?

**Benchmark:** So what are you focusing on?

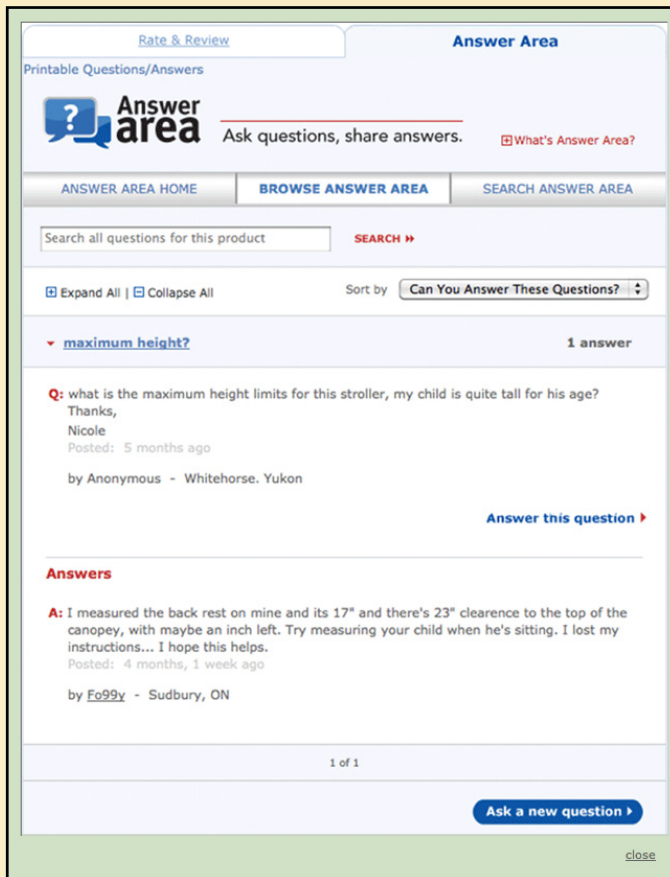
**Simon Rodrigue:** We just went through a complete rebuild of our review platform, as well as launching a new area called Answer Area, where consumers can ask questions and get answers from

other customers, and from vendors, as well as Sears associates, to really help drive interaction when they're purchasing the product.

As we move forward, one of the things we're looking to do is embed every single element of Sears.ca into the customer's social graph, their social life online. It's the ability to take pages and share them, whether that be by email, sharing a URL or a link, or bringing them into Facebook, or into Twitter — making that as easy as possible for the customer to do.

Because to me, social media isn't about going out and buying placement on sites like YouTube and Facebook. It's really about getting your customers to engage you in these platforms. And when you're doing that correctly, that's truly when Sears is a participant in the community, not just advertising in the community.

**Benchmark:** You mentioned 'Answer Area' as a new part of your customer review functionality. Where do we find that, and how does it work?



**Ask & Answer™** is an extension of the ratings function on Sears.ca. Here, visitors can ask specific questions about products, and get answers from other customers and Sears associates.

**Simon Rodrigue:** It's in the 'Ratings and Reviews' for any product. That's where customers are asking questions and really participating. It's really interesting. We'll do video responses to them. And a lot of other customers will get involved in answering the questions. So you're starting to engage that discussion. And you can see what people are saying about the product. It really gives you an understanding.

For example, take baby strollers. People are asking very specific questions that they need answered before they can make the purchase. We can then take that information and tailor our marketing, and even tailor the user experience on the site from a content perspective, to make sure we're providing that to the masses.

That's really been the key driver for us. Not only is it introducing community to the site, where we're engaging a larger Sears community, it's helping us with product conversion, and overall conversion on the site. Because we're providing more content.

And then you're also reducing returns. Because from the reviews, and from the Answer Area community, you're getting content that can help you improve the products, but you're also giving customers a much better expectation of what that product's going to deliver to them. These have been three big wins for us.

For us it was noticing the trends that exist online today. Then how can you incorporate that into the site. And then that's why for us social media isn't about having a million friends on Facebook, it's really about engaging your customers, and providing them with the tools and services to a) make their experience better, and b) also help them become those advocates or evangelists for your brand.

**Benchmark:** How long have you had the Answer Area functionality up and running?

**Simon Rodrigue:** It has been up since May.

**Benchmark:** And has it gotten good traction?

**Simon Rodrigue:** Oh absolutely. It's beyond our expectation in what it's delivering.

**Benchmark:** Here we are going into the holiday season with baited breath, wondering if it's going to be a good one, if everyone is going to make their numbers for the year. What kind of trends have you seen coming into the holiday season in terms of customer behavior, purchasing behavior, and how do you think that's going to pan out for the holiday season?

**Simon Rodrigue:** The great thing for us is, we're definitely seeing traffic increase on the site. I think Sears.ca is definitely becoming

much more relevant to the Canadian consumer, as we expand our assortments and launch new brands online. That's been very exciting for us.

I think, like every retailer, we'd like to see conversion on a visit improve from where it's been. In the past, you would see people making purchases on their first and second visit, where now, people are trending to two, three, or four more visits before they make a purchase. Which is understandable that, in these times, people are definitely looking for value.

And they're doing comparisons with other options available online. But Sears.ca is very well positioned in the marketplace from a direct selling perspective, with their catalog and online business to provide that overall value to the customer.

**Benchmark:** Great. So how has that tracked through in terms of revenue? Higher traffic, lower conversion, but where is the revenue landing?

**Simon Rodrigue:** We're definitely still experiencing growth overall in the online channel.

**Benchmark:** So while you're refreshing the site, what are you doing to get ready for the spikes in holiday traffic? Will you be load testing even as you're building new functionality into the site?

**Simon Rodrigue:** A number of things. One is that we have a group dedicated to improving performance on the site, and [Keynote](#) plays a big part in that. We actually treat [Keynote](#) as an extended part of that team, with the monthly insights they provide us on areas where we can drive some improvement.

Why that's so important to us is that it provides another set of eyes that are constantly looking at multiple other sites. So you're getting the experience about what other businesses are seeing with [Keynote](#) as well, and they can provide that input to the team. And we have a world-class team here, and they're very good at what they do.

The other thing we engage as well, whenever we're doing a redesign, a refresh, or enhancing functionality on the site, is that we engage [Keynote](#) to do load testing and also break testing on the site, so we're really understanding where those critical points are.

So, for example, on Boxing Day, when we see those giant spikes of traffic, we'll understand where those trigger points will be on the site that we really need to be watching, or supplementing with additional hardware bandwidth, or services from companies like Akamai.

**Benchmark:** It's hard to imagine that you're not losing sleep over all this, with the holidays right around the corner.

**Simon Rodrigue:** We're really engaging [Keynote](#) to help us with this. You know, as you make changes to support your peak time, you need to have that capacity and experience to make sure that what you're doing actually will work under those conditions. And to us, why we chose [Keynote](#) as our partner is that we have that trust, that they can provide that understanding. So when we talk about what we're doing right now, both from a monthly performance perspective and also from a testing perspective, [Keynote](#) is a critical partner in both of those areas.

**Benchmark:** Earlier you mentioned the correlation between site performance and revenue performance. In your experience, how significant is that correlation?

**Simon Rodrigue:** We definitely experience, when we have slowdowns in performance, that conversion levels can fall. At a theoretical level it makes sense, if it's taking 6 to 10 seconds for a page to load that customers are normally loading in sub-two seconds, that their patience will be a lot less.

Especially now when everyone's got incredibly high speed Internet connections into their home. They're used to pages popping very, very quickly. One of the reasons we focus on it so much is that we have seen this correlation — that by improving performance — even when you're running good performance, by improving availability incrementally or improving performance incrementally, we do see a return from a conversion perspective, and hence a revenue perspective.

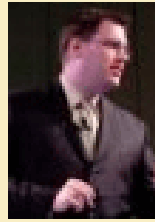
So it is one of those pillars we have people focused on all the time. It's not just a peak season thing for us, it's 365 days a year that we are focused on improving performance. But especially as you go into peak seasons or busy days in the U.S. like Black Friday, or in Canada like Boxing Day, and just in general the Christmas season, slow response times are going to affect sales.

**Benchmark:** OK, so to sum up, what's your number one piece of advice for online retailers?

**Simon Rodrigue:** I just wrote a blog post on this, but it's five points. I really think it's listening to your customers, and understanding how they're using the site today, and how you can improve it to make it better into the future. I don't think this is necessarily about going out and saying, 'tomorrow we need to have a social media strategy.' I think it's, 'tomorrow we need to understand how customers are using our site, and what can we do to make it easier for them to get from A to B, and delight them during that process.'

By doing that they'll see more engagement in the site. And if you're listening to them correctly, they will give you more ideas on what you need to drive.

**Benchmark:** OK. We'll send our readers to your blog, Evolving Shift (<http://www.evolvingshift.com>) to read more about your customer strategy. In the meantime, good luck with the holidays, and we'll be watching for new and exciting things at Sears.ca.



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**Simon Rodrigue**

Simon Rodrigue joined Sears Canada in July of 2008 to assist in the continued growth and evolution of the top direct business in Canada. As AVP of ecommerce, Rodrigue leads the online strategy, user experience, marketing

and online operations teams, while developing a multi-channel plan that continues to position Sears Canada for the future. Before joining Sears Canada, Rodrigue lead the eCommerce and Interactive Marketing team at Home Depot Canada. Over his four years there, homedepot.ca was one of the fastest growing online businesses in Canada and recognized as a leader in social commerce practices.