



Everything you need to know about faceted search

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What is faceted search?

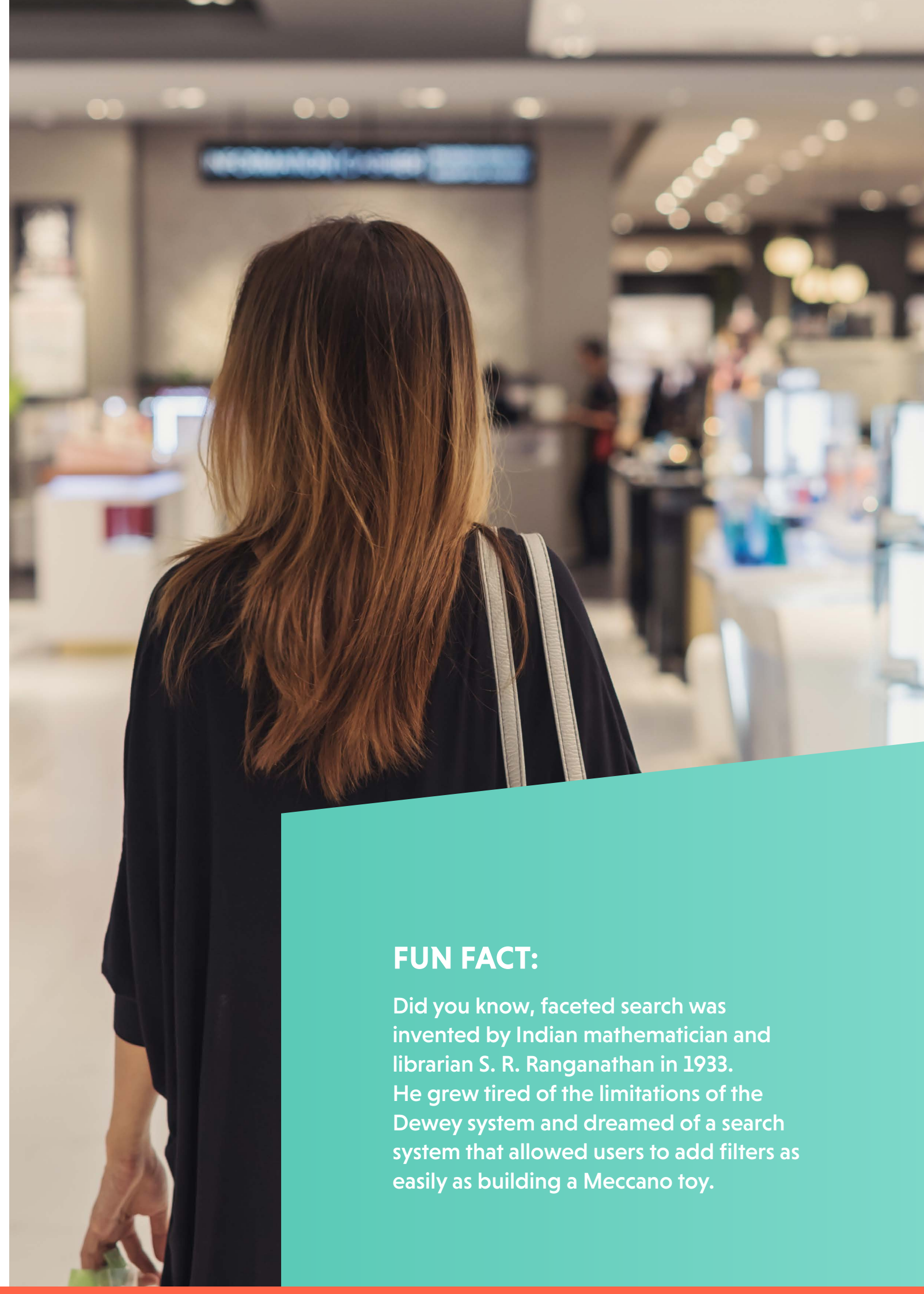
In a sentence, faceted search, sometimes referred to as guided search, makes it easier for your customers to find the exact product they're looking for. This is achieved by allowing users to select specific categories to search within, called **facets**, and thus narrow down the potential search results they are presented with.

Imagine yourself walking into a large department store. You're looking for some perfume as a gift for a friend. You wouldn't expect to have to traipse all the way around the store until you randomly bumped into some perfume – if you did, you wouldn't be returning any time soon!

Instead, you'd head straight for the perfume department where you'd find exactly what you were looking for.

Facets can be seen as the various departments of your online store.

Smarter than that, facets can also act like a virtual personal shopper. A customer might visit your online store in search of the ideal perfume for their friend. They know they want it to be either a floral or fruity smell, in a 50ml bottle, and priced at less than £50. With faceted search functionality on your site, they can browse all the products you stock that match that criteria, allowing them to find the perfect scent, within their budget, in just a few clicks. Faceted search is simply a more effective alternative to basic filters and navigation.



FUN FACT:

Did you know, faceted search was invented by Indian mathematician and librarian S. R. Ranganathan in 1933. He grew tired of the limitations of the Dewey system and dreamed of a search system that allowed users to add filters as easily as building a Meccano toy.



Are facets different from filters?

You're totally forgiven if you get these two terms confused, as the difference is fairly subtle. But yes, facets are different to your typical search **filters**, if only by degree.

SEARCH FILTERS

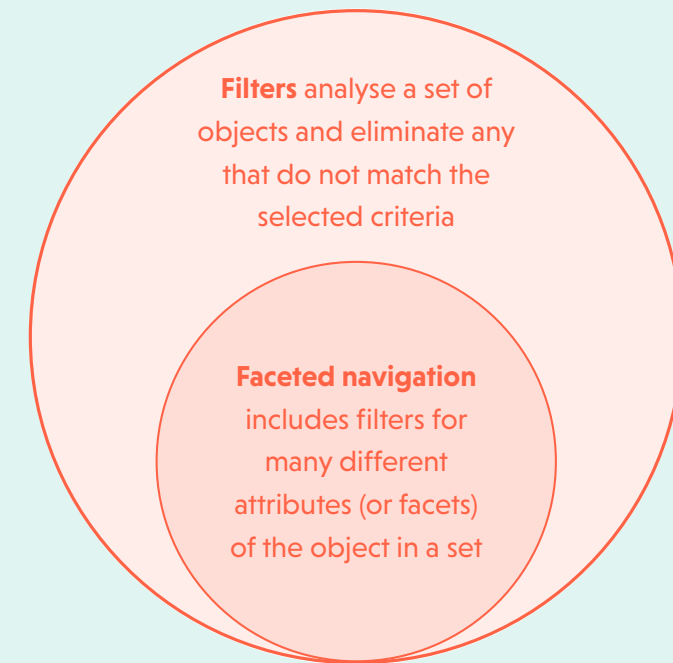
The role of a search filter is to analyse a dataset (in this case, your products) and exclude search results that don't fit certain singular criteria. When you visit a fashion e-retailer, for example, and click 'Men' in the navigation bar, you're only presented with clothes for men – women's clothes are completely excluded. This is a search filter.

SEARCH FACETS

Search facets, on the other hand, provide your customers multiple different filters, one for each different attribute of the products you offer. The results that match all these criteria are then presented.

For instance, someone visiting an online furniture retailer may choose to filter their search to only show chairs that fit into the 'Garden Furniture' category. Fair enough. But now they're left with a list of all chairs in that category. What if they knew they were searching for a white, wicker garden chair? That's where faceted search would prove useful.

By offering up more options, like colour and materials, you're making your customers' lives easier and nullifying any obstacles they may encounter along the buyer's journey.



The screenshot shows the Sephora website search results for "eyelash". The page is annotated with several labels and arrows:

- CATEGORIES**: Points to the navigation bar at the top.
- FILTER**: Points to the "GIFTS" link in the navigation bar.
- CATEGORY SCOPE**: Points to the "Category" dropdown menu on the left sidebar.
- FACETS**: Points to the "FILTER BY:" section on the left sidebar, which includes "BRAND" (Bobbi Brown, Chosungah 22, Clarins, DUO, Estée Lauder) and "PRICE RANGE" (\$5 to \$40).
- PRODUCTS**: Points to the "PRODUCTS (86)" tab at the top of the results.
- sort by**: Points to the "sort by" dropdown menu.
- view**: Points to the "view" button (60 per page).
- FILTERS**: Points to the "FILTERS" link in the top right corner.
- SORTING**: Points to the "sort by" dropdown menu.

The search results show 9 products, including DUO Eyelash Adhesive, BLINC Lash Primer, and BENEFIT COSMETICS Roller Lash Curling & Lifting Mascara.



What are the benefits of offering faceted search?

There are many benefits of offering faceted search, for both your business and your customers. Let's break them down.

BENEFITS FOR YOUR CUSTOMERS

- **Simplicity**

Gone are the days of scrolling through endless search results. When you know exactly the product you're looking for, getting to that product page as quickly and as simply as possible is your main priority. Faceted search facilitates that.

- **Discovery**

Your customer may have an item in mind when they search, but facets can guide them towards discovering options they never knew existed. *"They sell trousers in pink? I have to check them out!"*

BENEFITS FOR YOUR BUSINESS

- **Higher purchase intent**

Consumers who visit your site with a clear idea of what they're looking to purchase are further ahead in the buyer's journey than those who are just browsing. Ergo, they are far more likely to go ahead and buy from you. Offering them a faceted navigation system to find their desired product quickly and easily will increase this likelihood even further.

- **Ahead of the curve**

Fewer than half of e-commerce sites offer faceted search functionality. This gives your business a chance to stand out and deliver your customers an awesome search experience that'll ensure they come back and purchase from you again.

- **Rich data**

Collecting user data on the types of products that most interest your customers and how they navigate your site is vital to creating a successful e-commerce business. This data allows you to discover trends and patterns, optimise the website, and even personalise offerings to increase sales. Faceted search offers you even richer data by allowing you see exactly the kinds of goods your customers are most interested in.

- **Reduced null-result searches**

Searching a website and being presented with a page saying '0 results found' is an infuriating experience for shoppers. In fact, if this happens to one of your potential customers, they're **3X more likely to leave your site** and never come back.

Thankfully, with faceted search, your results can be configured to only show facets that have results in them. This saves your customers a lot of aggravation and boosts your chances of making a sale.



Is faceted search right for my business?

Although implementing faceted search has many potential up-sides, it isn't the right solution for every business. If your e-commerce site offers fewer than 100 items, for example, facets – or filters of any sort – may be overkill.

If your e-commerce site does offer a wide variety of products, however, and you're keen to grow revenue, increase traffic, and improve your customer's experience of shopping with you, faceted search is a powerful tool for the job.

For example, outdoor retailer REI helps shoppers choose a sleeping bag, even when **they aren't entirely sure how to shop for one**.

What temperature range do they need? How much do they want to spend? Do they have a brand in mind? Smart facet planning allows your product catalogue to present the kinds of questions that a sales person in a physical store would ask to help a shopper find what they need – without overwhelming them.

If you have a varied and large catalogue, facets can make the difference between a happy customer who comes back for more, and a would-be customer who gets frustrated and goes elsewhere.

10 things to consider when designing faceted search

1. KEEP YOUR FACETS RELEVANT

This might seem obvious, but it's often overlooked. Keeping your facets and the options within them relevant to your products is crucial. If you're a computer retailer, for example, your facets should include brands, price, processor speed, and so on. But there would be little point including a colour facet in this instance, as the colour of a computer is often an afterthought for buyers. Your facets should always make it easier for your customers to narrow their search and find the products they're looking for.



2. GREY-OUT INAPPLICABLE OPTIONS

Faceted search's modus operandi is to make searching easier for your customers. However, pointless facets which lead to null search results can cause a large amount of user frustration. If a customer is searching for a high value product like a 4K TV, for instance, allowing them to choose a price facet with a range of £0 – £50 will lead to a page yielding no results. This situation can be avoided but greying-out irrelevant options organically and unobtrusively as customers select various facets, keeping the search process running smoothly and mitigating irritation.



3. KEEP IT USER-FRIENDLY

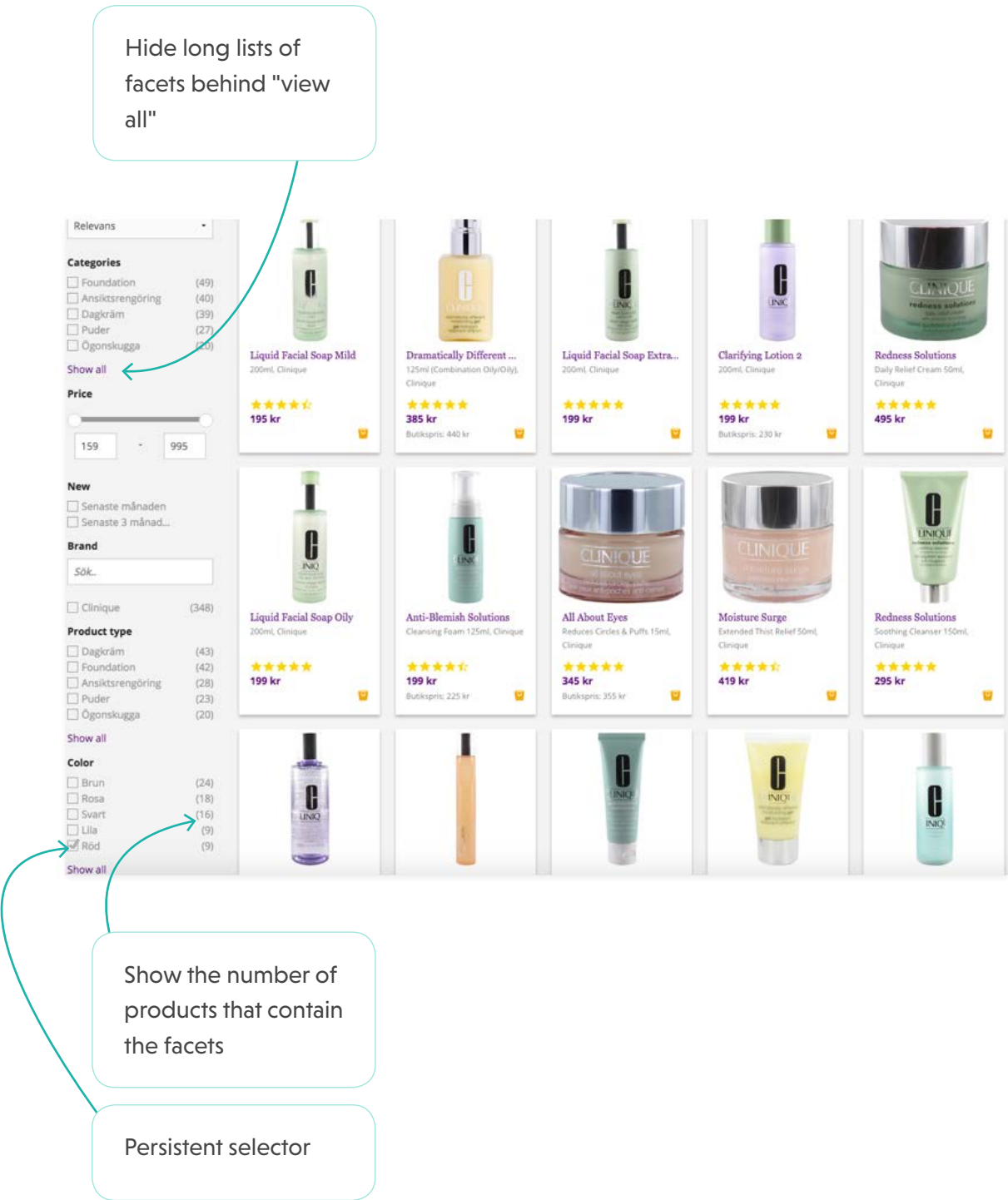
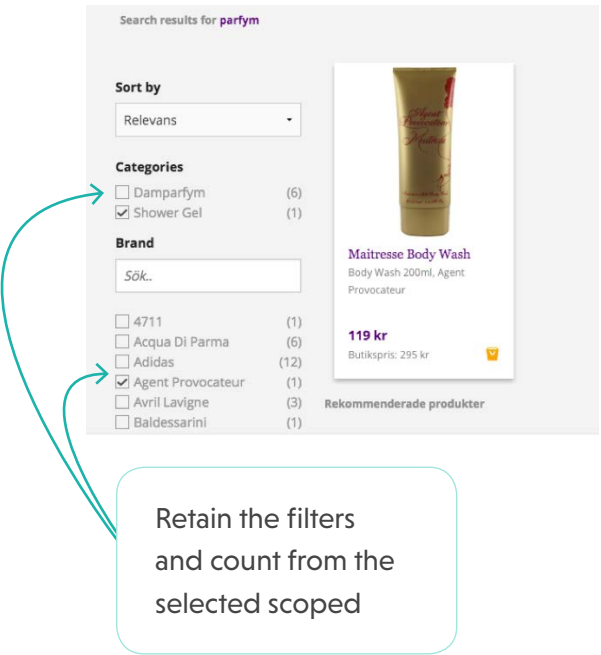
Studies that track the movements of users' eyes as they navigate a website have shown they spend half their time looking at the facet section, so designing your faceted search for maximum usability is a must.

There are many different design options to consider – should the price options be presented as checkboxes or sliders? Should your faceted search run vertically or horizontally across the page?

Another design consideration is which facets to keep displayed. With so many to choose from, your site-search can end up looking messy and confusing. A simple way to negate this is by using collapsible menus. Perhaps you could display only the most popular facets straight away and allow your customers to explore the others at their own discretion using drop-down menus.

Perhaps images would better represent your facets than words, too. Popular glasses store, The Sunglass Hut, offers a 'Face Shape' facet, which it presents with images of said face shapes. This won't work for every store, but people recognise and interpret images much faster than text (**60,000 times faster**, in fact), so it might be something worth considering.

Ultimately, how you decide to design your search is up to you and depends on the products you're selling. Still, taking user experience into consideration when making these decisions is critical to successful site search – see our **UX design guide** for more inspiration.



4. UTILISE YOUR USER DATA

Designing an effective site search takes a fair amount of guesswork in terms of how you think your users will use your site. However, once your faceted search goes live, you can begin to tweak your design decisions based on user data you've collected.

If users are rarely selecting a facet, for example, perhaps replacing it with a more useful option, or removing it all together, would make more sense. Regularly refining and tweaking your faceted search based on user data is best practice. After all, if your search is polished to the point where users can find exactly what they want in just a few clicks, they're going to be that much more likely to go ahead and purchase.

5. FEATURE CUSTOMER RATINGS AS FACETS

88% of people now trust online reviews as much as they'd trust a recommendation from a friend. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to allow your customers to narrow their search via user ratings. This is a fantastic way of ensuring they'll discover quality products they want to purchase. There are various ways of implementing this, the most effective being a 5-star rating system.

If your website has a lack of customer ratings or only sells a small number of products, this facet may be irrelevant. However, as your business grows, offering customer ratings as a facet will not only prove useful to customers but will also build a great deal of trust in your products.

6. USE THEMATIC FILTERS

Thematic filters are an awesome way of showcasing even more of your catalogue to your most motivated shoppers. If you're a clothing retailer, you could offer thematic facets like 'Work', 'Festival', 'Occasional', 'Night Out', or 'Casual'. If you sell furniture, thematic filters like 'Contemporary' and 'Traditional' would work great.

Utilising thematic facets will not only let customers find exactly what they're looking for, but they'll also inspire your customers towards future purchases by showcasing the full breadth of your product line.

7. OFFER AN APPROPRIATE NUMBER OF FACETS

Featuring too few facets in your site-search can frustrate shoppers, even if they're super-relevant. Facets are there to help users narrow their search, so give them enough to choose from. Alternatively, having too many facets can overwhelm potential customers. It's a balancing act, but experiment until you find the right number of facets for your shop.

8. SHOW NUMBER OF MATCHES NEXT TO FACET OPTIONS

Showing customers the number of matches available in a facet – before they've selected it – can really ease the shopping experience. It steers them clear of dead-ends and dreaded null-results pages while educating them about the kinds of products you have on offer.

9. ALLOW FOR MULTI-SELECT

Sometimes people will want to see results for blue, green, and black dresses all at once, or filter products by multiple brands. Ensure they're able to do so by letting them select more than one facet from the options available.

10. OFFER PRE-SET AND USER-DEFINED PRICE RANGES

It's a good idea to offer an adjustable price slider in your facet bar. It lets customers see the full range of your prices and allows them to search for products that will fit within their budget.



SEO best practices

Whilst faceted search can offer numerous benefits for your business and your customers, if you're not careful, it can have negatively impact your SEO ranking. Many companies build their site search without considering that they're creating duplicate URLs for each search page. These duplicated pages compete, reducing **PageRank** on search engines.

There's a simple way of checking how many pages Google has indexed for keywords on your site. Just go to Google search and type the following:

site:yourdomain.com, keyword

If the number of results you get far outweighs the number of products you sell with that keyword, it's a good indication that Google are indexing low-value pages – usually because of your faceted search. Never fear – these best practices will help.

IMPLEMENT A JAVASCRIPT/AJAX SOLUTION

This is often the most effective solution to the issue of low-value pages being indexed. Ajax is a client-side script that allows visitors to update sections of the page – like sorting products into different categories – without requiring a total reload of said page.

This means that when search engine crawlers land on this page, they'll read its content and index for keywords the page has been optimized for – and not the keywords of your many products.

There will be times when you'll want Google to index specific product keywords, like 'Puma Trainers'. This will require you to build a well-optimized, crawlable page for it separately. Check out this article on **SEO optimisation** for more details.

CANONICALIZATION

You can ensure that unique pages share just one URL by using **canonical tags**. Canonical tags will inform search engines which pages are useful for customers and should be indexed and which pages are duplicates and should remain un-indexed.

NOINDEX TAGS

Another way to deal with duplicate pages is to add a 'noindex' tag to low-value pages. This is a simple means of telling search engines which pages to exclude from indexing. However, this solution is rather unsophisticated and can cause a variety of other SEO issues for your site.

When designing your faceted search, make sure you follow these SEO best practices. After all, if customers struggle to discover your website easily via search engines, then your efforts spent on building a great site search will go to waste.

FUN FACT:

Did you know, Google alone processes over 40,000 search queries every second – that's 3.5 billion searches a day! Make sure you're indexing your facet pages correctly to ensure they appear in Google's search results.



Conclusion

Now you understand what faceted search is and how to best utilise its features, it's easy to see the advantages it will bring to your e-commerce site.

You'd be forgiven for finding the idea of setting up faceted search on your website daunting, but Loop54 is here to help. We aim to have your new search system up and running in just 2-3 weeks, offer unique **dynamic faceting** capabilities, and we'll take care of maintenance for you. **Start a conversation with Loop54 today to learn more.**



Glossary of terms

- **FILTER**
A search tool used to sort results based on generic site-wide attributes, such as brand, price, size etc.
- **FACET**
Like a filter but more granular, facets sort search results based on multiple product specific attributes, such as price and material and colour.
- **ATTRIBUTES**
The unique characteristics of each product in your range. Facets are often based on these attributes.
- **PAGERANK**
An algorithm designed by Google that determines where your webpages will appear in search results.
- **CANONICAL TAGS**
A piece of code that tells search engines like Google that a specific URL is the master copy of a page, preventing the problems caused for SEO by duplicate pages.

Loop54 offers true personalised on-site product search.

Shoppers expect the same level of relevance and personalisation online as they experience in-store. Powered by Machine Learning and built exclusively for e-commerce, Loop54 delivers that exceptional online shopping experience.

- **Automated:** Automatically learns words and merchandises search and category listing
- **Relevant:** Interprets search intent to deliver truly relevant results
- **Personalised:** Sorts results according to popularity and personal taste

Jula is just one of the clients who has seen conversion rate soar after implementing our exceptional site-search. Book a demo to see what we could do for you.

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