Can Google's eCommerce Services Wooing the B2B and B2C Market?

My late mother loved catalogs. She would examine them. She would identify unique products at what she considered "great prices." She loved direct mail commerce, and I am confident she would have found eCommerce equally engaging. Google is aware of the market for catalogs, a sector of the market that is a bit of a mystery to me. But I am not a shopper.

Data-centric Google knows shopping, and the firm's innovators have made some interesting eCommerce moves. You may be one of the Google watchers who remembers Google Catalogs. The service became available in 2001. When I first examined the service, Google was scanning hard copies of catalogs and making them available online. A decade ago I was uncertain about the service. I wondered if Google were testing scanning, optical character recognition, and search using what looked to me to be the type of mail my home mail box spawned like *Star Trek* tribbles. The service languished for years and then disappeared in the Google cost cutting moves in mid 2011.

Then without much in way of fanfare, Google Catalogs was back. The present incarnation was disclosed in The Official Google Blog in "Shop Your Favorite Catalogs with Google Catalogs." http://goo.gl/uX8P1 Not surprisingly, little attention has been paid to Google's appification of my mother's favorite form of reading. Google asserts:

> *Today, mobile technologies can make catalog shopping more engaging, social and creative. With that in mind, we've created Google Catalogs—a free app for tablet devices that enables you to browse all of your favorite catalogs and interact with new layers of rich-media content. The Google Catalogs app features digital versions of catalogs across many popular categories, including fashion and apparel, beauty, jewelry, home, kids and gifts. We've partnered with a variety of top brands including Anthropologie, Bare Escentuals, Bergdorf Goodman, Bloomingdale's, Crate and Barrel, L.L. Bean, Lands' End, Macy's, Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, Pottery Barn, Saks Fifth Avenue, Sephora, Sundance Catalog, Tea Collection, Urban Outfitters and Williams-Sonoma, just to name a few.*

The app, available only for the iPad when I did some poking around, provided some interesting features. Google implemented a "find in nearby stores" function. My mother—may she rest in peace—would have loved it. I am not sure she would have toted an iPad to the mall and used it to find bargains, but the idea would have resonated. The catalogs are electronic and inherit the search, alert, and social functions that Google is infusing into its products and services. The clunky scanned images of the 2001 implementation is gone. Google Catalogs is now firmly rooted in Google's 21st century cloud technology.

Is this a new direction for Google's enterprise eCommerce line of business?

Google Checkout is available for organizations who want to sell products and services online. You can explore store fronts based on the Google technology on the Google Checkout Success Story page at http://checkout.google.com/seller/quotes.html. I explored Golfballs.com at http://www.golfballs.com. The system runs on Microsoft's ASP.net framework and uses Google Checkout for its eCommerce back office functions. The other sites I explored seem to rely on Google for the pure eCommerce function, ignoring Google's enterprise APIs (application programming interfaces) for other vendors' front end technology. The search system delivered point and click links to make it easy to refine a query. Golfballs.com is embracing Google's open social technology in order to tap into the potential of Google's new "plus" service when it becomes available for businesses. http://goo.gl/tHN2l

Google provides what I would describe as a "box of parts" for a company looking to use the Google enterprise technology for a commercial eCommerce system. The approach makes sense for organizations looking to tap into Google's cloud services. A start up, for instance, could use Google for its front office software. The limitations of Google Docs are not likely to affect most business professionals. The presentation service works reliably. The word processing program makes it easy to apply styles and use some advanced features such as footnotes. The Google Gmail solution has become more reliable and secure with each slipstreamed upgrade. Even lovers of paper calendars will find Google Calendar, which is part of the Google Apps for Business "messaging" cluster. You can dig through the features at http://goo.gl/fy2y2.

In short, Google's eCommerce line up is strong, and the company is making an effort to enhance the options for small business as well as developers. Programmers can build comprehensive eCommerce systems using Google's platform and its frameworks.

The question which interests me, "Is Google able to match the solutions available from EasyAsk or Endeca?" There are other eCommerce solutions, including the open source contenders Magento, http://www.magentocommerce.com/, the hosted version of Avactis http://www.avactis.com/, and the European Exorbyte system www.exorbyte.com.

Let's look first at Endeca. The company is one of the leading players in the enterprise search market. However, the firm has roots in eCommerce where its "Guided Navigation" solution pioneered suggestions to help online shoppers find closely related products. Endeca has stepped up its marketing of its data management, content processing, and search system as a business intelligence solution. However, eCommerce continues as one of Endeca's strong markets.

The company describes itself as offering "agile information management software." You can explore the Endeca eCommerce system by navigating to Home Depot www.homedepot.com, New Egg www.newegg.com, or the Bass Pro http://www.basspro.com/homepage.html store front. Endeca www.endeca.com offers a wide range of business to business eCommerce services. These range from customer facing applications that display special promotions, support catalog services, underpin field sales tools, and various analytics-centric solutions. Endeca provides social features for sharing, suggesting, and interacting with information.

When one compares Endeca with Google's eCommerce offerings, there are several points of similarity. First, both firms make excellent use of their partners. Google relies on partners to perform integration and support on its behalf. Endeca's spin is that its extensive partner network drives sales leads and works closely with Endeca's business professionals (many with MBAs) and engineers to implement a solution. Second, both Google and Endeca deliver products and services at what I consider higher price points. Certain fees are very attractive, but when the complete job is finished, Google and Endeca often cost significantly more than solutions from other firms competing with these giants. Finally, both firms sell at what I call "the senior management level." Google gains access by virtue of the sizzle that wafts from any mention of the company. Google's brand is magical and few senior executives can resist an opportunity to visit with Google's professionals, snag lunch at the Googleplex, or get a tchotchke like a mouse pad with the Google logo. Endeca's access to senior management comes from the firm's clever use of high profile business consultants. For example, the management superstar Michael Porter, who serves as the chair of Endeca's strategy committee.

By way of contrast, consider EasyAsk. This company offers a natural language processing technology which can impart intelligence to eCommerce applications. Based in Burlington, Massachusetts, EasyAsk was formed in 1999 by Dr. Larry Harris, a computational linguistics professor who also happened to be an expert on database systems and computerized natural language. The company prides itself on spearheading changes in the natural language search field, increasing both speed and ease of use. Users can ask a question in plain English and expect highly tuned results. We urge you to take a test drive. In our view, EasyAsk's natural language technology makes other eCommerce solutions seem out of step with user needs.

EasyAsk's technology is used in the fast growing NetSuite http://goo.gl/Qi7y line of cloud-based services. The company's president, Craig Bassin, told me:

> *While EasyAsk also supports the navigational style of search we go much further in helping customers find what they want quickly. EasyAsk's natural language approach allows buyers to enter an entire descriptive phrase of exactly what they want. The natural language and semantic processing engine understands the context of the search and returns accurate results on the first page, greatly increasing conversion rates. With EasyAsk, customers can chose how they want to find products, and they will find them faster.*

I then probed the NLP or natural language processing capability, a feature which I do not associate with eCommerce services available from Endeca and Google.

> *Natural language technology also drives stronger spell-correction, relaxation and stemming capabilities, eliminating a much greater number of "no results" pages than other types of e-commerce search technology. When a customer enters a search and the site returns a page with no matching results, the visitor is more likely to leave the website and find somewhere else to get what they want. EasyAsk enables e-commerce websites to always return search results, reducing the number of lost visitors.*

One of the characteristics of EasyAsk which further differentiated EasyAsk from some of its competitors' approaches is the ease of use which results from the firm's NLP technology. In my previous encounters with NLP technology, I experienced what I call "computational sluggishness", which is a nice way of saying "slow."

Mr. Bassin asserted:

> *Our advanced indexing technology supports extremely large, scalable product indexes. Our indexes can scale in multiple dimensions, including number of products or SKUs and the number of attributes used to drive user searches, giving EasyAsk the ability to index extremely large datasets. We support indexes of twice the capacity of typical in-memory, high-speed, searchable indexes, providing a significant performance boost in searches across large datasets. EasyAsk also scales easily with Web load balancers and industry standard clustering technology. Load balancers can balance HTTP and SOAP requests across multiple EasyAsk servers to scale front-end search load. Clusters can be used to scale EasyAsk instances to drive larger volumes of search data and results. And, we support 64-bit operating systems, allowing us to load high-speed searchable indexes completely into large memory address spaces for extremely fast access. EasyAsk's natural language technology provides an extremely high degrees of search quality without the need for expensive search tuning, providing excellent "out of the box" performance.*

Back to Google. Now that Google is wrestling with its $12.5 billion dollar acquisition of Motorola Mobility, I will be watching to see if Google's eCommerce initiative continues to expand. Faced with competition from established firms such as Endeca and from companies like EasyAsk, Google faces challenges in the enterprise sector.

Google Catalogs on the iPad shows that Google engineers can surprise and delight users. Now the company must convert those capabilities into products and services that generate value for the company's enterprise unit. Without investment of time and money into Google Apps for the Enterprise, the company will find that key accounts go to established vendors such as Endeca and to agile providers of next generation technology like EasyAsk.

My mother loved catalogs. Can Google spark the oxytocin's for the enterprise market?

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