Google’s New Shopping Actions Program: What You Need to Know by @ebkendo

It’s not paid search, it’s not SEO, but it’s e-commerce and its Google.

We’ve arrived – all of the worlds have officially smashed together in one giant ball, in what is already proving to be a tumultuous world for retailers (R.I.P. Toys “R” Us) and brands; welcome to the newest entry into the thunder dome.

Let’s start out with a definition – Google’s Shopping Actions are, well, everywhere.

Shopping Actions refers to the handling of the transaction by Google rather than what we’re used to when it comes to Google, which is the referral of the user to our own websites and social properties where the transaction would take place. It’s most often connected right now with the Google Express platform, but it’s in a lot more places than that.

What Google Express Was

Back in 2013, Google launched a trial program in a handful of cities meant to connect local brick-and-mortar retail locations with same day or overnight delivery in Google-branded vehicles, similar to the Amazon Prime Now program.

Eventually, the site morphed into more of a marketplace look, without the Google delivery people and focused on large retailers looking for exposure to put up their catalogs in key categories.

What Purchases on Google Were

You might remember the “buy button” that Google announced in 2015, the product listing ads mobile enhancement.

Purchases on Google (POG) was designated an experiment and largely stayed at that status.

While there was an interest form that any merchant could fill out, you had to be able to have at least 50,000 mobile impressions in a month, pass a mystery shopper test and be approved by Google for various other criteria.

The traffic was relatively controlled, only showing on average at its height at 20-30 percent of mobile PLA impressions.

There were other caveats as well – you could only do single item checkouts, so merchants selling items like shoes or items with a high average order value and those not obsessed with basket size would see more use than merchants for whom multi-item orders were a priority.

And that’s provided that the user didn’t use the “escape hatch” that would exit the POG experience and direct the user to the merchant’s product page on their site.

POG ads popped up as an interstitial after a search was performed on a mobile device, giving the user the option to buy within the search results with only a couple of clicks, using their Google Wallet for even quicker checkout.

While interest in the program may have been slower to adopt and the program was sunset at the end of March 2018, what is important is that the infrastructure built to support this feature, and the data Google collected that informed who would see a POG ad (a user had to display key behaviors to get a POG to show – I never was able to get one to trigger!), is now getting its chance to shine with Shopping Actions.

The order management capabilities, the transaction handling, payment options, consistent experience and easing conversion friction we all know that comes when buying from multiple web merchants, especially on mobile devices.

What Shopping Actions Is Now

Shopping Actions on Google Express is a collection of major retailers and brands, meant to offer a large assortment accessible through the Google Express site and app.

Shopping Actions is also available wherever Google Assistant is in use as well. By being available on Google Assistant, that means it’s on Google Home, but also on all devices with the Assistant. (According to Google, a Google Home device is sold every second – since October 2017.)

Additionally, Google has begun injecting Shopping Actions into search results pages (SERP) – yes, on the .com, not the Shopping section. Note that these results are in the advertising area, not organic search results.

Check out this mobile result:

For those of you in the home and electronics categories that have been noticing your SERP real estate being steadily taken over by Amazon, eBay and Walmart marketplace sellers, you may now see Express results as well or instead. And depending on which side of the sales fence you’re on, this could be good or bad for you.

Other defining aspects – Google is not selling alongside merchants on the program, like how Amazon today will insert their own private label brands like Amazon Basics, first-party brands that they are selling on behalf of or push forward Prime-eligible products or Fulfilled by Amazon (FBA) inventory in results that allows them to satisfy shipping and pricing expectations.

You'll also notice that if you look around in the Google Express experience that there are Product Ratings – these are being pulled in from multiple sources, similar and in some cases the same as what you see on Google Shopping results, but no Seller Ratings at this time, which you still do see in Google Shopping.

This could also mean that if you're a brand that's been holding off on submitting product reviews from your own site or using a third party aggregator – you might want to, as the universe in which those may get viewed is growing.

You might also notice that each store in Express has a storefront and their own distinct shipping thresholds for free shipping, as well as promotional offers, in addition to promotional offers that Google is offering for first time orders on any store.

Why Shopping Actions Will Be Significant in the Future

With Google's network size, ability to scale, and resources, if anyone is going to enter this space and have a chance at success of some kind, it's Google.

Major retailers struggle today with Amazon, meeting their pricing rules, dominant ownership of customers, cuts to their margins and in some cases, not even being allowed to sell on Amazon. Whereas, Google is working directly with the

retailers.

Target once sold on Amazon, for 10 years and then stopped in 2011 – it was estimated that they were doing about $1.2 billion a year in revenue. As you might imagine, recovering from that source of revenue loss is no small feat and today they are prominently participating in Shopping Actions, alongside Walmart, Walgreens, Costco, and Fry's.

As we get more comfortable as humans using voice devices not only for queries and commands, but for shopping, the Google study citing 44 percent of those that have such devices use it to order products like household items and grocery starts on weekly basis starts to sound more realistic, indicating a clear shift in where shoppers are going to be.

What Happens Now

Google does have an interest form that anyone can fill out to be considered, but as we all know, that's no guarantee.

There are clearly top categories displayed on the interest form needed to fill out an assortment that's most program friendly as part of the launch effort to gain traction with users.

The important questions will be mostly to you after the launch form:

- If you've only ever sold as the sole transaction handler (i.e., through your site) are you set up as a business to handle an additional input?
- Do you have the tax and inventory management capabilities?
- The setup and send of the catalog is still rooted in Google Merchant Center, so there may be some cross-over with Google Shopping and in some cases, content sharing. Are the roles and access clearly defined?

- Who will manage the program going forward?

That last question is the doozy – are we now asking SEO professionals or paid search marketers to understand and manage a transactional marketplace?

There are clearly elements of both here, optimizing content for voice search and discovery, working with the feed and in Merchant Center, harmonizing with Google Shopping efforts.

Or are we now asking those with experience on Amazon and eBay to learn and manage a Google program?

While similar, one is most certainly not like the other but there are transferrable learnings around multi-channel management and fulfillment, tax implications, customer service, and shipping metrics.

While we might not have all the answers today (do we ever though?) one thing is for sure, if this program gains the traction it could, Shopping Actions is going to be a game changer.

More Google Shopping Actions Resources:

Image Credits

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