The Home Depot Website Case Study

(homedepot.com)

The Company Statement

"The Home Depot is the world's largest home improvement retailer with nearly 400,000 orange-blooded associates and more than 2,200 stores in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. The typical store today averages 105,000 square feet of indoor retail space, interconnected with an e-commerce business that offers more than one million products for the DIY customer, professional contractors, and the industry's largest installation business for the Do-It-For-Me customer." – *The Home Depot - About Us*

The Purpose

To highlight the most used function of the website, the Search, and provide an easy method for customers to arrange the product list for viewing.

The Customers

For the purpose of this study, the customer interviews targeted homeowners, who seek new appliances or products for their building needs. While it is understood that the DIY community extends out to the non-homeowning sector & makers, The Home Depot's audience is predicated on home improvement for homeowners. The study conducted in-person interviews with 2 users, answering a series of 9 questions. As part of the interviews, a walkthrough was requested of the users in order to determine pain points and observe website usage.

Persona Outline

There wasn't a primary persona built out for this study, as there were only 2 preliminary interviews, but there was enough data to outline a sketched-out persona to focus the project:
- Homeowner
- Early-Mid 30's
- Married
- Do home improvement projects 3-4 times a year, "Quarterly"
- Use the website on Desktop/Laptop, at work mostly, during the day.
- Use the website mostly for product search to purchase in store, versus online.

Problem 1 – Search Function

Although the Search Function is relatively long across the top of the homepage, it's not the most prominent eyecatcher on the page, upon arrival. The orange "FREE DELIVERY" bar is dominant and there are many other visual elements that are cluttered around the page's header where the Search lives.
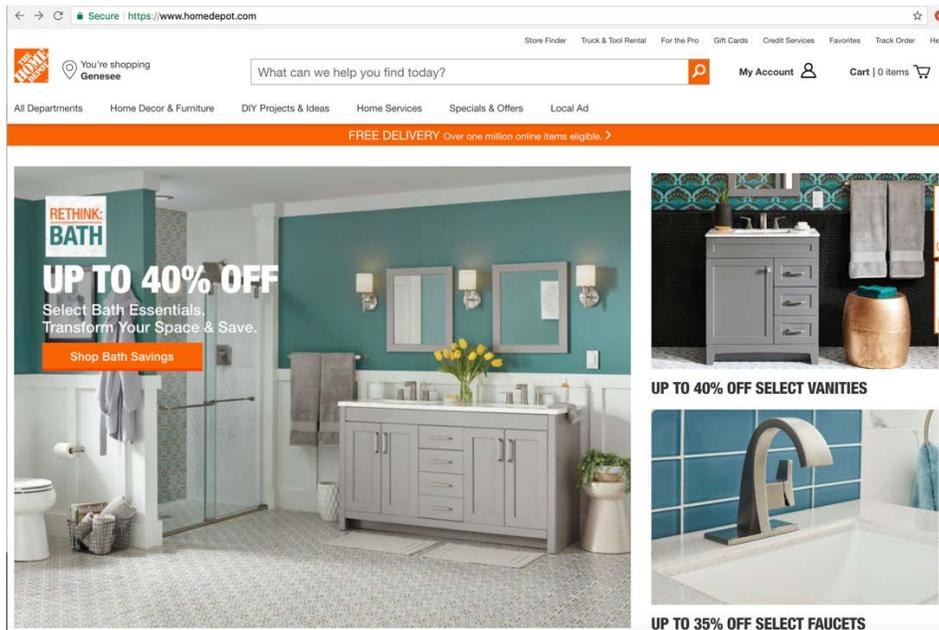

Why It's a Problem

For a website that "offers more than one million products for the DIY customer," the Search Function is the primary gateway to such a vast selection. Observing the users, during a sample product find, revealed that they only used the Search function. When prompted about the main-level navigation, both individuals confirmed that they rarely use it unless "window shopping" or "browsing… [using] a patient approach to finding products". Given the importance and frequency of use in relation to the store, the Search function must have a centralized focus on the website.

Solution

The Search Function's presence as the main access point to The Home Depot's products was achieved by:

- Replacing the orange "FREE DELIVERY" section to dedicate a tier for the Search function.
- Rounding the corners of the Search container to give it a slightly different look from the hard edges of the website elements, helping to bring attention to it visually.
- Moving "FREE DELIVERY" into the navigation, labeled "FREE Delivery" to maintain some CTA importance, without taking the attention away from the Search.
- Adding an "All Departments" category drop-down to the Search Box & removing it from the main navigation.
- Moving the help links in the top-right into a single "Help" link added to the main navigation; there is a Help page that currently exists, which contains all of the associated help links.
- Moving the main navigation section below the Search tier.
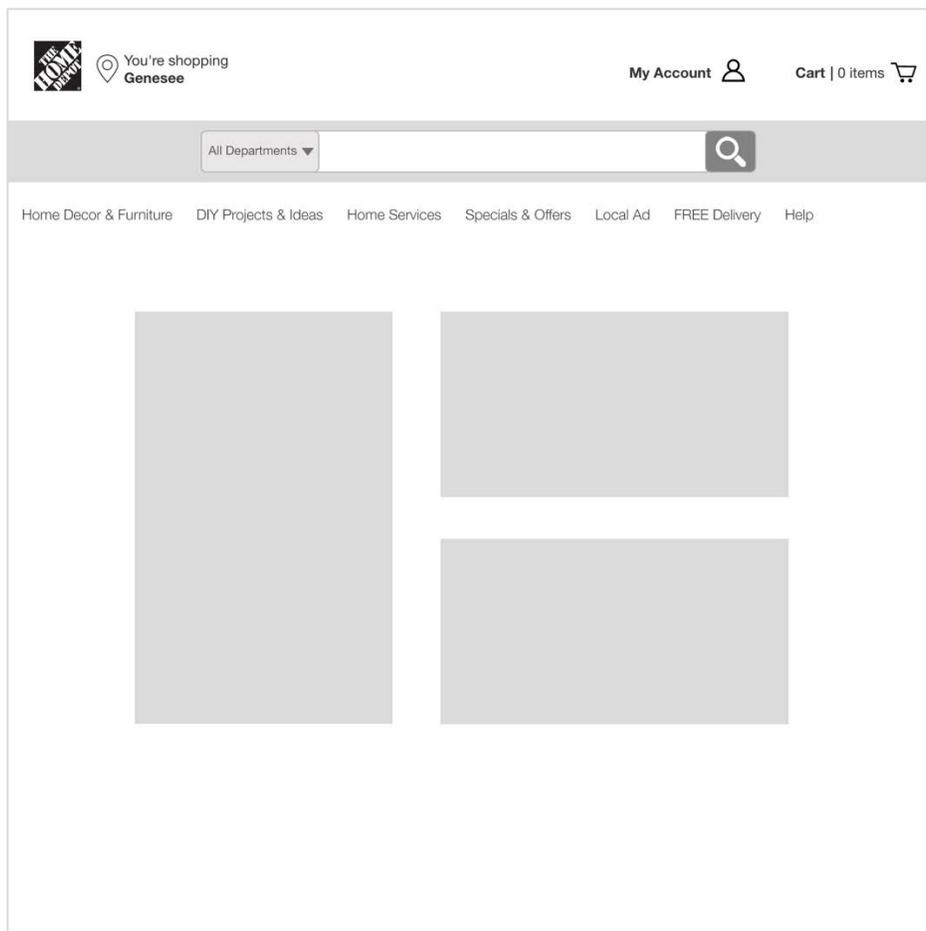
Why It's a Solution

Utilizing familiar experiences is vital to usage, so it benefitted the solution to research familiar products to the user. As a result, comparative observations were done with websites mentioned in the user interviews (Lowe's, Amazon, and Google).

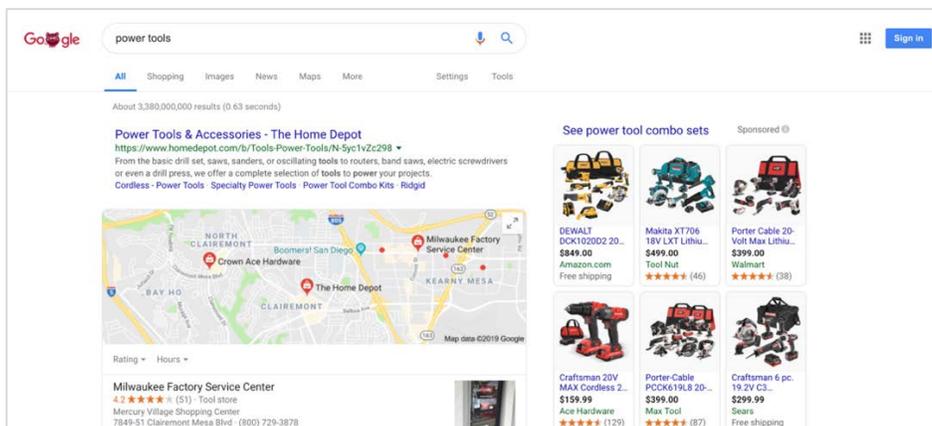*"… would almost like something more aggressive with just 'Search'."*
– User #2 referring to Google.

Google (homepage & results page)
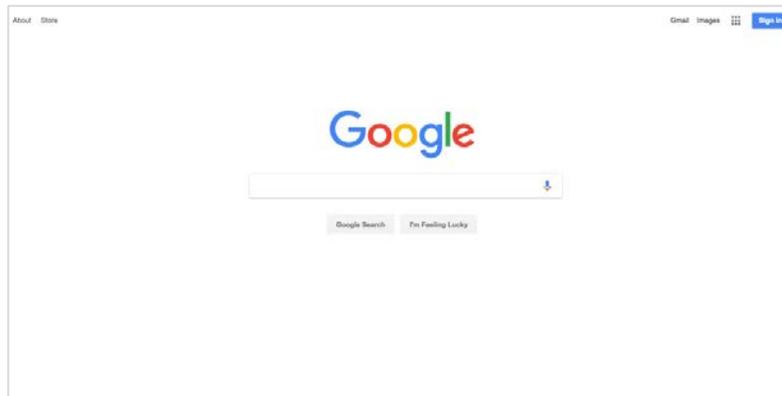

Observations (Google homepage):
- Search is centralized on the page
- Dedicated tier/level on the page for the Search function
- Search box is longer than logo to create a presence
- TONS of whitespace to frame the page's central focus

Observations (Google search results page):

- Search Function at the highest level of the page hierarchy, shared with logo
- Rounded container for visual contrast.
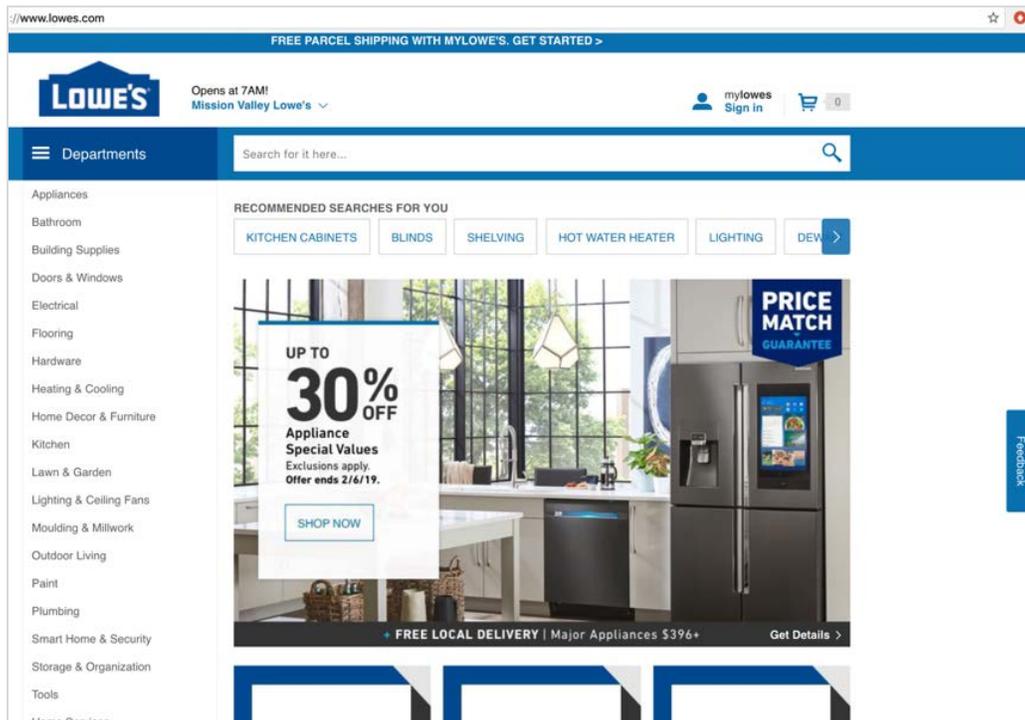- Good use of whitespace to frame top-level.

Amazon
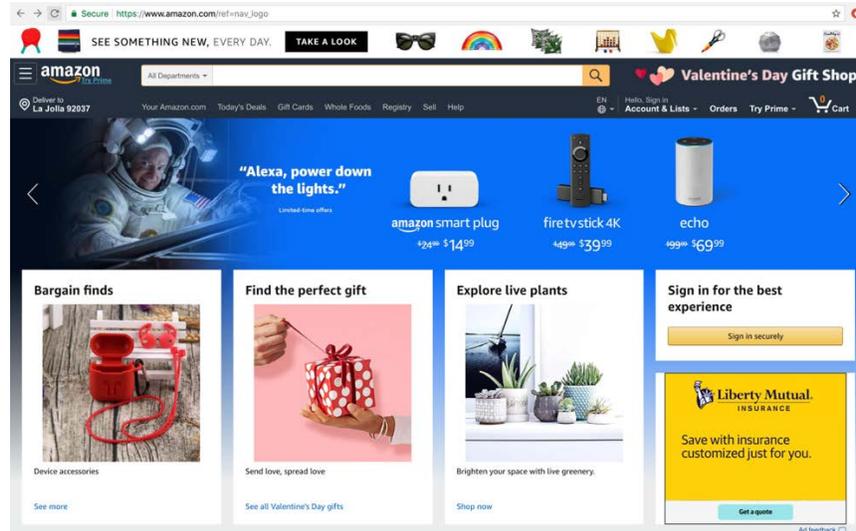
Observations:

- Search included in the logo tier, but the section's hierarchy is competing with the top row in white.
- Search function occupies most of the real estate in the tier.
- Has an "All Departments" drop-down selection as a search filter option.
- Rounded corners for visual contrast with square elements of page.

Lowe's

Observations:
- Has a tier dedicated to the Search function.
- Search function takes up most of the real estate within dedicated tier.
- Logo tier is uncluttered with lots of whitespace, bringing focus to the Search tier.

Mockup & Validate

The comparative observations helped derive 2 potential solutions for testing. Idea 1 attempted to put the Search at the highest tier of the website, shared only with the logo and store location, much like the Google search results page. Idea 2 created a dedicated Search tier, below an uncluttered header, like the homepages of Lowe's and Google. The screenshots were presented to 3 random customers for validation.

Idea 1	Idea 2
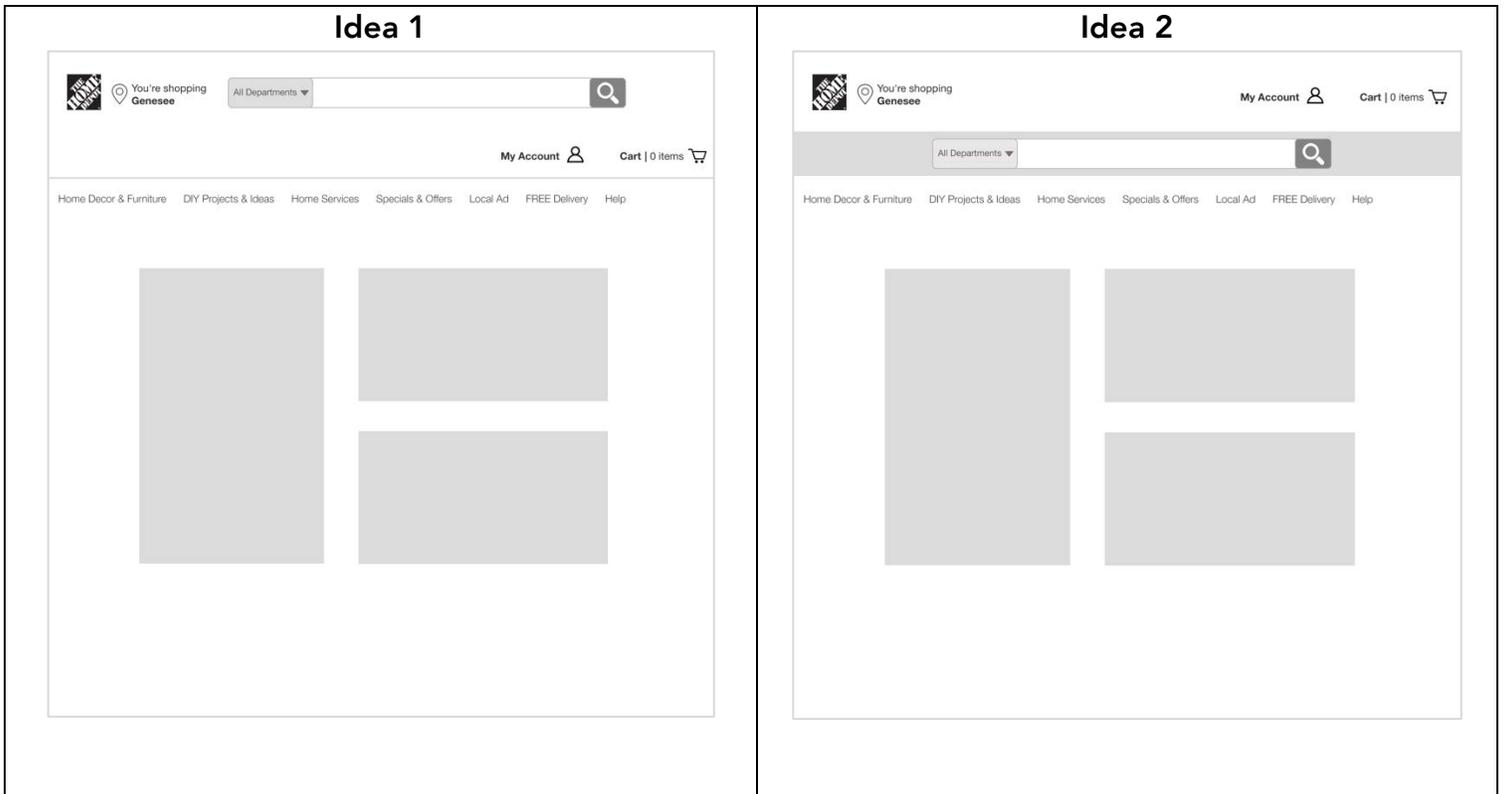
"Which page do you feel is the best one to help you find your product?"

Participant 1: "#2 because [the search] is featured more."
Participant 2: "The second one. It's more standardized, central… familiar, like Amazon."
Also, pointed to the "All Departments" selection in the Search function being "familiar."
Participant 3: "Immediately recognizable," while pointing to #2.

Both solutions were attempts to present the Search function in the most recognizable ways by referencing the comparative company sites mentioned in the interviews. The second layout, with a dedicated Search tier, emerged as the successful proposal after querying participants for their preferred layout.

Conclusion

With many other elements presented at the top, a less disruptive approach was to replace the orange tier with a Search section, similar to the competitor Lowe's. It centralizes the search, like Google is successful for, and also brings in an added feature of the category selection that Amazon uses as a filter. By moving the search out of the top tier, it declutters that respective section and highlights the search row. Having the drop-down navigation below the search level, prioritizes Search on the page in comparison, which is in line with how the users interacted with the website during the walkthroughs.

Problem 2: List View Option for Product Results Page

During the sample product search walkthroughs, the users were actively looking for a List View Option icon while filtering products. One user actually sketched out the icons that she was looking for to filter the page. The Home Depot's website does not provide a List View Option in the product results page to assist with what another user called a "more specific" approach.
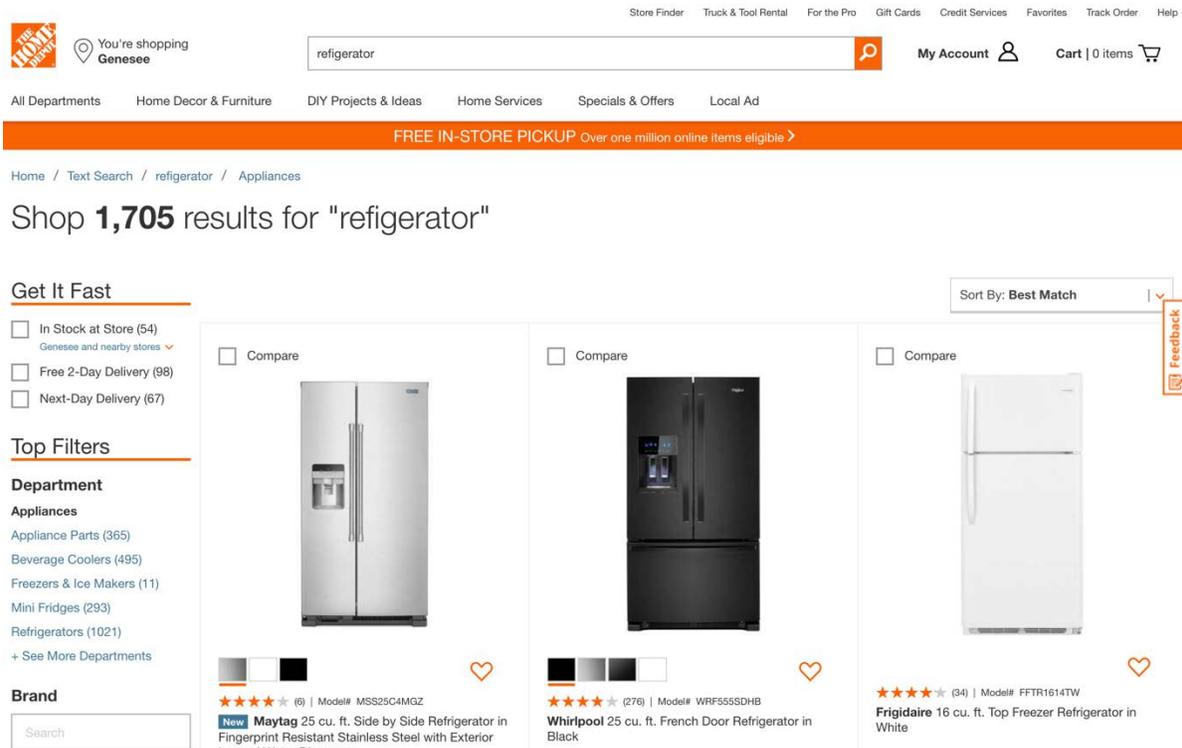

Why It's a Problem

While the grid view is a popular layout for condensing product display to allow for scanning more products, it's a busy layout for reading product specs when a customer has narrowed down their selection. One user was trying to explain the types of details they like to eventually decipher, stopped the walkthrough, and said, "everything blends… there's no list view". The Home Depot has a large inventory to look through and the List View Option can assist customers with their final purchase decision.

Solution

Adding the List View Option to The Home Depot's results page was attained by:
- Creating familiarized icons utilized in other websites for layout customization.
- Placing the icons next to a filtering feature, "Sort By," in order to increase the recognition of the function.
- Rounding the corners of the icons to give the impression of interactive buttons.
- Keeping the Grid View as the default layout upon arrival to the results page and placing a background color on the active icon to assist with function recognition.
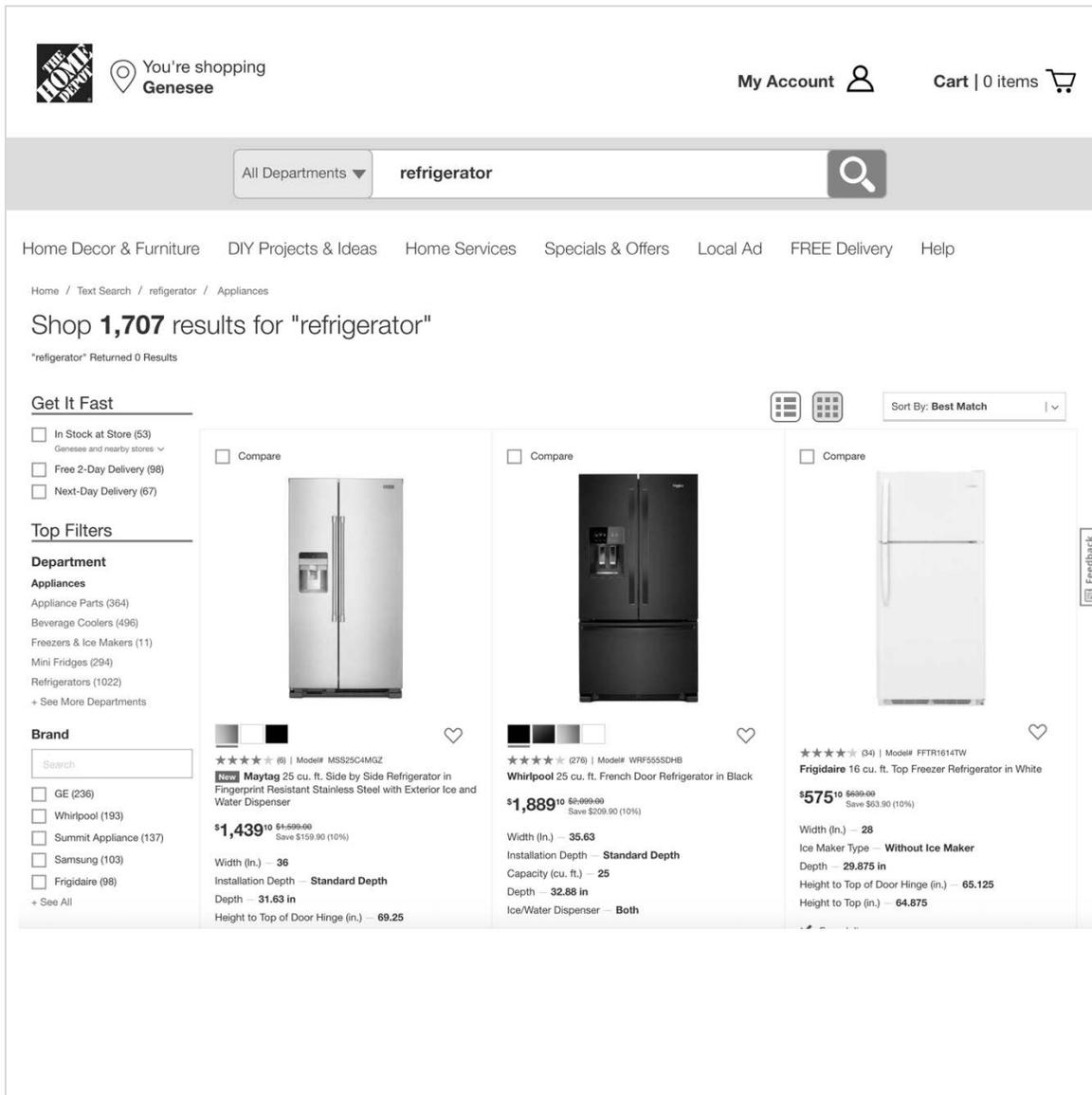
Why It's a Solution

A busy product page requires creating a standardized usage of the List View icon to make it easily recognizable. Comparative observation had to extend outside of the sites mentioned in the user interviews (Lowe's, Amazon, Google), as those sites don't have the List View option either; Amazon received minimal analysis, given the List View is the singular product layout, aside from ad inserts. As a result, the study looked at the implementations present on the websites of Walmart and Costco.

Walmart

Observations:

- List & Grid View icons are located in a dedicated tier for filter-related actions, i.e. "Refine by" & "Sort by" all coexist on the same level.
- Grid View is the default product listing on the search results page.
- List & Grid View icons are not very prominent on the right, whether active or inactive.

Costco
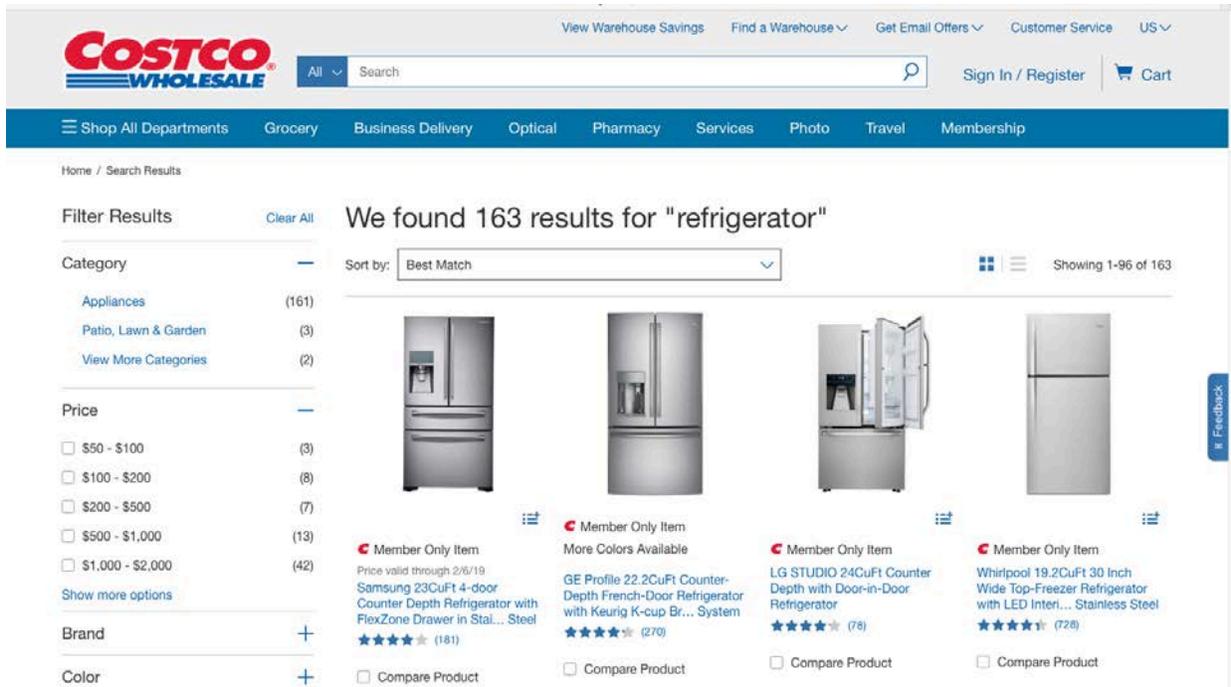
Observations:

- Grid View icon is noticeably highlighted in blue to indicate the active layout
- Icons are recognizable and similar to most implementations
- Located in a common area of the page on the right side, above product listing
- Stands out compared to "Showing 1-96 of 163", making it more prominent
- On the same tier as another filter function, "Sort by"
- Grid View is the default product listing on the results page.

Mockup & Validate

From the comparisons of Walmart and Costco, there were similar icons created for the Grid and List View. They were added into a mashup of Solution #1, with product list captures from The Home Depot and another store, to create two screenshots for user testing. I presented the Grid View and List View to 3 random users for testing.

Grid View	List View
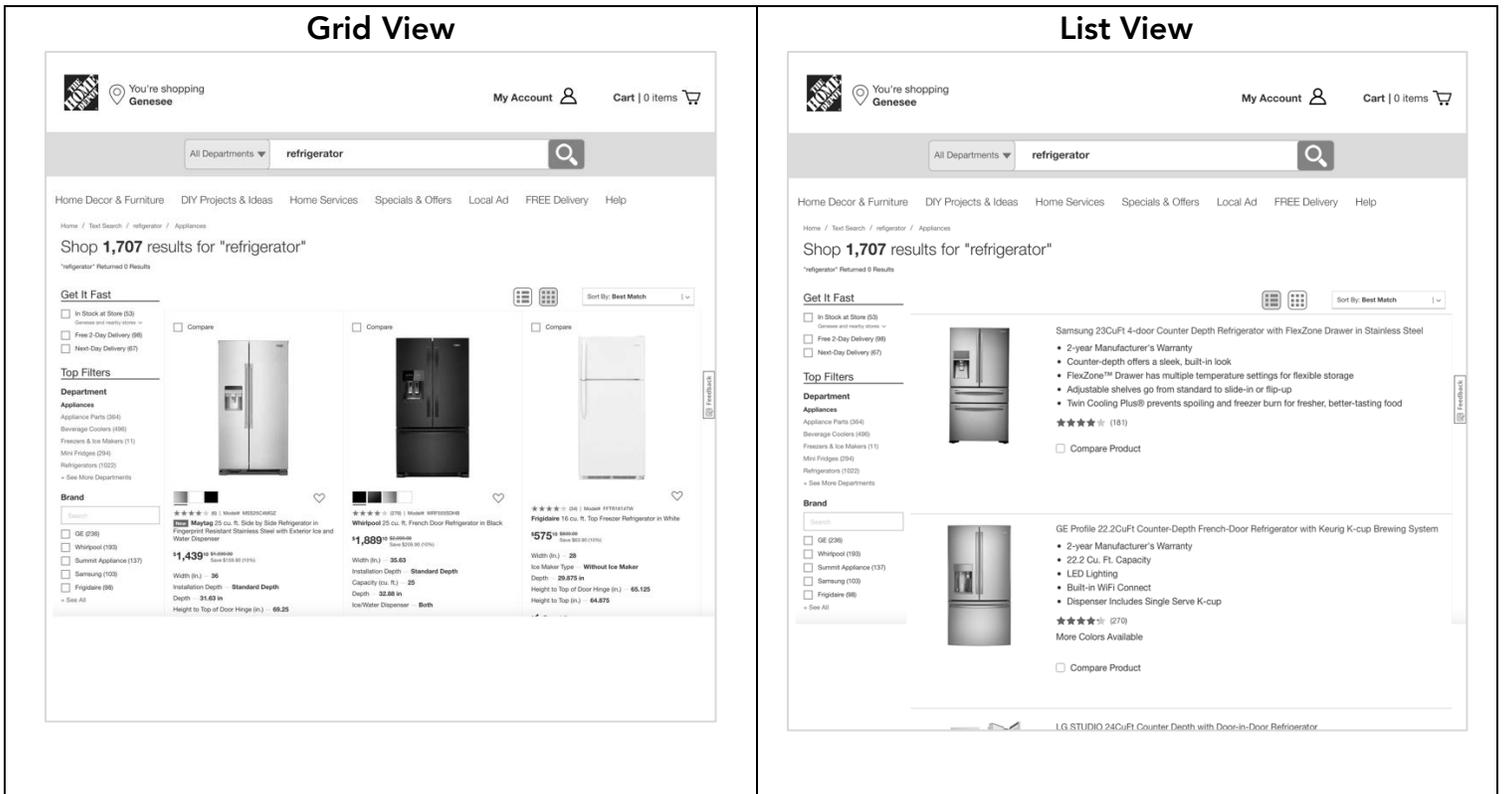
"If you performed a search for refrigerators, which layout would you prefer to view the results?"

Participant 1:
- *"[Grid View] because I can see more per row… a standard layout."*
- *While pointing to icons, "If I need to customize my list, I can toggle like Gmail."*
    - *"Standard icons"*

Participant 2:
- *Pointed to Grid View, "It's for a broad search."*
- *The Grid/List View icons were spotted while looking at Grid View, "They're recognizable icons from other places... Home Depot, I think?"*

- *Describing the use of the List View, "for narrow down, once I get to 1 or 2 [products]."*

Participant 3:
- *"[Grid View] to see more pictures."*
- *While referencing how the Grid is "too clustered", the Grid's use is for "high level decisions".*
- *The List View was described in the product finding process as "narrowed down, specific."*
- *When the Grid/List icons were spotted, participant didn't think they were highlighted enough, because of "the noise on the page."*

The inquiry was performed to confirm the default layout of the results page and validate the recognition of the List View Option icon. Two of the 3 participants, immediately recognized a way to get to the List View, when the Grid View was isolated in front of them. The third participant, ultimately recognized the List View Option icon and registered what it meant rather quickly, finding it to be a useful tool, but remarked about the competing "noise."

Conclusion

With a product page that contains many filters and other visual elements, it was important to come up with a way to allow for a readable layout, once a customer was ready to process decisive details. By showing test screens to users with a similar icon design and placement, relative to competitors, the proposed solution was validated by the testers as a recognizable execution.

Wrap-Up and Key Takeaways

Overall, this study was driven by the data collected in the user interviews. Even initially talking to only 2 users, the project was able to retrieve valuable data that is hard to get by remote means. Ideally, the study would have benefitted from the recommended 3-5 user subjects and a bona fide primary persona. However, with the data that was collected, acceptable solutions were reached and validated by users that were different from the interview subjects. Most notably, collecting user data for the study wasn't overly sophisticated— A simple questionnaire, pen-to-paper, and 15-20 minutes with each interview subject. The validation tests? A simple game of *'Which one's better?'* and about 5 minutes of their time. One of the screenshots even had a product listing from another store pasted into the body of the layout. It simply didn't matter for the purpose of the test. It's not always the easiest to schedule in-person meetups, but projects seem to always benefit the most with this level of data. Ultimately, that is why these solutions are solid proposals for redesigns.