TECHNICAL CATALOGUE SEARCH DESIGN / ILLUSTRATIVE CASE

Can buyers find a part that actually fits?

The management decision

Evaluate search quality against the part the buyer needs. Returning a plausible but incompatible product can turn a search improvement into a return and a support call.

Technical buyers often search by a model number, a measurement or the equipment a part needs to fit. If the catalogue only recognises its own product names, buyers may give up or choose something unsuitable. Better search helps customers continue with confidence and gives support teams fewer avoidable product-finding questions. It also shows which details the catalogue needs to collect from suppliers.

Worked example

In 300 searches, 45 find nothing, a rate of 15%. If a proposed change returns suitable matches for 18 of those queries, the rate could fall to 9%. Test whether the suggested products actually fit the buyer’s equipment.

Example figure	What it represents
300	Searches sampled
15%	Returned no result in the sample
9%	Projected no-result rate

What changes the answer

If six new results are incompatible, only 12 searches truly improve. There would still be 33 unresolved or unsuitable searches out of 300, or 11%.

Technical catalogue search design

What to commission

Review searches for one equipment family, including alternative names and a known incompatible match.

We examine how customers ask for products, which attributes genuinely help narrow a choice and what the search should show when a match is uncertain. We also identify where a product data gap makes a useful answer impossible.

How to judge the result

Sample searches return a compatible product or a clear next step when compatibility cannot be established.

Look at searches with a suitable result alongside service enquiries and compatibility-related returns. Use the same set of test queries before and after changing the filters.

Decision worksheet

Project detail	Starting point for your team
Decision owner	E-commerce product or merchandising lead. Name the person who will approve the next step.
Records to gather	Sample searches, product details and examples where compatibility matters.
Agreed output	A search and filter specification, common alternate terms and worked test searches.
Decision date	Record the deadline, any unresolved assumption and who will confirm it.

Discuss this case

Send two or three examples of real searches that customers struggle with and say which product families matter most. If orders are returned because a part does not fit, mention the compatibility detail people typically miss. We can use those examples to define a first review.

Email info@oxetc.co.uk and mention IT-11. All figures in the worked example are illustrative.