

WHITE PAPER

16 Tips for Building an Engaging Ecommerce Experience

How to tackle the obvious and not-so obvious challenges



Introduction

This is it. This is the year. Your company is ready to make the move and launch your ecommerce website. Or maybe you are well established online. So now it's time to make the move to new technologies (complete with the latest bells and whistles) and launch a re-platforming project. Whatever the case, building (or rebuilding) your ecommerce site can be a daunting task – one where many stakeholders across your all departments have a vested interest in its success.

Before you move forward, there are some obvious key points and action items to keep in mind. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. What about other challenges, pitfalls and "gotchas" lurking beneath the surface, ready to create problems and trigger unanticipated (and unplanned for) costs? Here are some insights into what to plan for and when. Some things you have on your list...some you might not.

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First things to keep in mind

As you start to strategize and plan for your new or re-platformed ecommerce website, you will no doubt want to keep these more obvious requirements top of mind. Consider this checklist #1.

Brand your site – How do you want to represent your company's brand online? Is yours a playful brand? Or a more serious one? Are you an emerging brand or one with an established retail store? Remember customers expect their online shopping experience to mirror their in-store experience. Therefore every aspect of your ecommerce website – from graphics to navigation – should align with your brand and support a consistent, cohesive message and shopping experience. After all, shoppers will connect their experience with your brand, not your website.

Know your audience – This goes hand-in-hand with branding. You want to define your audience and understand its buying behavior. Then make sure your webstore relates to how your target audience prefers to interact with ecommerce sites. For instance, some shoppers prefer 3D models that help them virtually try on clothing or footwear. Others demand 360-degree views of products. Some shoppers favor personalized buying guides based on past purchases. And some will want to pick up their web orders in your retail store.

Know your competition – Conducting competitive analysis enables you to better understand the current online marketplace and your place in it. No doubt you are already using Google Alerts to monitor web mentions of your competitors. Be sure to also check out competitors' Facebook pages and Twitter feeds to see what is being said about them.

Decide how customized you want to go – As you look for ecommerce solution partners, look at the full range of offerings available to you – from out-of-the-box-and-ready-to-go packages to highly customized options. As a general rule of thumb, the more customized your ecommerce solutions, the higher the cost and the longer the development time.

Build a great user experience – Use proven best practices where possible to create a friendly, intuitive and easily navigable online experience for your customers. Careful thought and planning is required here because providing an exceptional customer experience also requires integrating your back-office applications and databases with your web store so you can streamline order management, simplify payment processing, expedite shipping and enhance personalized service.

Factor in basic operations – How you approach operations for your ecommerce site depends on how your company is set up and if yours is a new or re-platformed site. If you are re-platforming, you no doubt have already staffed up or outsourced certain tasks. If this is your first venture into ecommerce, make sure you have sufficient support lined up for every aspect of operations. You might find that existing staff members have very adaptable skillsets. For example, people on your buying staff might be good candidates for taking on additional ecommerce support responsibilities. Other key operations areas: Do you keep shipping in house or outsource it? And what about web developers? Do you want to keep that task in house? Or outsource to a partner, agency or freelancers?

Find the right ecommerce solution partner – Your business is more than an amalgamation of ecommerce applications. It is a complex network of systems, applications, middleware and databases. It requires detailed workflow analysis, a thoughtful plan and levels of customization. Your chosen service provider should demonstrate more than an understanding of ecommerce technologies. The right partner will also offer expertise in back-office systems, legacy applications, database development, data conversions and process chains, as well as information exchange between disparate systems and trading partners. So research your options thoroughly. Talk with peers at similar-sized companies. When you have narrowed down your partner candidates, ask the tough questions so that you have a clear idea of what to expect when it comes to the scope of solution delivery, price, structure and timeframes.

Set clear expectations for ROI – Have a clear idea of when you expect to see a return on your investment in a new or re-platformed ecommerce solution. And keep in mind, ecommerce platforms have a relatively low cost but high ROI in the spectrum of enterprise IT projects – and they support a new or maturing revenue stream that meets the needs of a changing consumer. The most conservative of re-platforming pitches can be attractive even – or even more so – in tough economic times.¹

Now prepare for the hidden challenges

The obvious consideration points just discussed are in many ways merely the tip of the iceberg when it comes to building or re-platforming your ecommerce site. More challenges lurk beneath the surface. Be aware of these “gotchas” from the get-go and save yourself more hassles, problems and unexpected costs down the road.

Make checkout easy – Build your shopping cart and checkout using best practices. Don’t reinvent the wheel or get too creative. Consider your audience. And plan carefully for promotion, coupon usage and messaging (such as “Free shipping if your order now”) at checkout, which is where abandonment is most

likely to happen. Keep your shoppers in mind when creating the site's areas for payment methods, shipping, information privacy, return policy and customer support. Perhaps you have no immediate plans to ship internationally, but you might still need to offer international billing options, such as wire transfers. Be sure to determine what types of payments are most convenient for your audience.

Plan for solution support after launch - Who is going to address bugs and development projects after the site is launched? And will you need to hire a team of developers to work in house or will you partner with a service provider? Think ahead and detail the projects that you will need to address after launch, and then have a plan for how these enhancements can best be completed. Set clear expectations every step of the way. Other factors to consider: Is your site running on on-premise servers? Or in the cloud? Who owns security? Who is your banking partner and will that partner integrate well with your ecommerce activity while adhering to compliance regulations?

Define reporting needs – How will you handle your financial reporting? Will you report the total dollars for orders received in real time? Or will you report the amount of orders the day after they ship? Your webstore is an ecosystem, so understand the expectations of your business partners and how ecommerce financials fit into the rest of your corporate reporting processes as well as management's expectations and various departments' needs. Also how will you handle site analytics? Metrics reporting, using Google analytics or Omniture for example, offers key insights into site performance.

Don't forget marketing – What percentage of your budget will you dedicate to marketing and developing your audience? Is 8 percent too low? Is up to 15 percent too much? Investigate what other companies with a similar product are doing to build or re-launch their online brand. As you prepare to launch your ecommerce site – and as you evaluate it post launch from a marketing perspective – think like a shopper and consider the types of incentives that entice them to make a purchase. The challenge comes in aligning customer needs with your company goals. Consider your ongoing promotional needs as you build your site so that you can plan for necessary site enhancements post-launch. Be flexible and adjust your marketing strategies accordingly. Also make sure that your ecommerce site plans and schedules are in synch with traditional marketing vehicles, such as print catalogs, advertising themes and email campaigns, as well as in-store promotions.

Set your strategy for incorporating editorial elements – How will you promote and/or archive your trend shopping pages and blog entries? Consider search engine optimization (SEO) requirements when planning how you will feature your more editorialized shopping sections. Keep in mind URL structure and search options within your site to enable customers to access current and past editorial content with speed and ease.

Define your strategy for social media – How are you going to incorporate social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter? It's all part of your online ecommerce activity. Also determine who is going to handle social media. Will you have a dedicated person or team? Or will they be taking social media on as an additional responsibility?

Integrate with other applications – Of course, your ecommerce site must connect and communicate with other applications key to your overall business operations – including supply chain, inventory management, shipping, ERP, CRM and POS. If you partner with other providers in any of these areas, keep in mind that the way you design your site may impact their operations. Bring them into your deployment planning process early on. That way you can avoid finding out the hard way that their system does not integrate well with your new ecommerce solution.

Go mobile – Today's digital consumer expects a seamless, personalized, online shopping experience via whatever device they choose. That's why market research firms predict that mobile commerce sales, which hit US\$6.7 billion in 2011, will reach \$US11.6 billion by the end of 2012, and will then go on to hit US\$31 billion by 2016.² So when you are designing and implementing your new ecommerce site, make sure to follow best practices for mobile access via smartphones and tablets.

Summary

Launching a new or re-platformed ecommerce site marks a significant step for your business – one that can be fraught with unexpected challenges. The key to success lies in advanced planning and awareness of any potential issues before they arise.

From basic operation, navigation and website design to plans for support, purchasing options, mobile applications and social media integration, you want to consider all aspects of your ecommerce site for a risk-free deployment and smooth ongoing operations.

Do your homework first. Talk to colleagues in your industry, check out what competitors are doing and incorporate best practices along the way to ensure a great webstore experience for your customers and optimal results for your business.

About the author

OSF Global Services (www.osf-global.com) has been delivering SLA-grade professional services since 2003, having established itself as a trusted advisor and technology integrator to clients in 17 countries. The company's forte is application development and technology integration across key markets, including Ecommerce, CRM and Cloud. Headquartered in Quebec, Canada, OSF has offices in the U.S., Romania and Ukraine. This mix of onshore and offshore expertise offers comprehensive, follow-the-sun support for clients. OSF Global Services is ISO 9001:2008 certified, Microsoft Certified, a Salesforce.com Consulting Partner, a Netsuite Solutions Partner and a Rackspace Hosting Member Partner.

For information on how OSF Global Services can help with your ecommerce requirements, please contact us at info@osf-global.com or (888) 548-4344.

¹ The Forester Wave™; B2C eCommerce Platforms for eBusiness & Channel Strategy Professionals, Q4 2010; by Brian K. Walker
² [Mobile Commerce Forecast To Hit \\$US6.7 Billion By The End Of The Year](#) and [Mobile Commerce Forecast: 2011 To 2016](#)