

Good practices for the development of an e-commerce web site

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E-commerce holds huge opportunities for businesses to extend their market reach, but a successful online operation requires some basic elements. Generally, two important components can determine the success or failure of an e-commerce project: the website and the sale.

We will try to cover the general principles that need to be implemented to ensure the success of your project, regardless of the type of products or services you want to provide online.

The website

👉 Domain name

This is the name of your site, but not necessarily your company's name. For example, if you plan to sell books online, a domain like www.books-online.com.lb has three main advantages:

1 It is easy to remember (this is important because word-of-mouth is a very efficient way to promote your site).

2 Domains with a country extension (com.lb) are subject to verification by competent local authorities and this is a way to gain the trust of potential customers who are aware of that (trust is often the key that triggers the purchasing act).

3 Your site will be easier to position among the top search results in search engines.

👉 Hosting

Bandwidth, which is the maximum amount of data that can travel a communications path in a given time (usually measured in bits per second) and the hardware set up, must absorb activity peaks. There is nothing worse for your clients than waiting for pages to load, or facing a denial of service because the server is overloaded as a result of your recent promotional campaign!

Also, software providing detailed usage statistics should be installed on the server as it will inform you of the most visited pages on your site, the average time spent per session and number of visitors per day. That is all precious information to enhance your marketing strategy.

👉 Platform

The platform is the site itself. The way your products are sorted, by categories, sub-categories, price range and so on, is very important. The more comfortable the visitor feels while browsing your site, the higher the chances of a sale.

The navigation has to be kept intuitive and, if possible, the “3 clicks” golden rule has to be respected: the user has to reach the product he's searching for within three clicks from the home page.

The way people can navigate from one section to another and the way products are linked to one another is very important. You have to keep in mind that the way you index your products is not necessarily the way the buyer wants them to be sorted—his logic is not yours! The opinion of people from outside your organisation might be helpful in that regard.

Your e-commerce platform should allow you to access the system everywhere a connection is available. You must have the possibility of adding new products, new product categories, changing prices and managing promotions without the intervention of your e-commerce platform provider.

👉 Design

The graphic design is the first impression you give your potential customers and it creates prospects for your site. When possible, always opt for a simple design that favors the message and not the media. You have to find a balance between the information you want to convey on the first page and the “quantity” of design. Do not let the design erase the message because a good design is always one that helps to deliver the message.

👉 Content

Inform!!! You have to provide your clients with accurate and relevant information about how the site works, who you are, your product specifications and, generally speaking, give all the information that can make a potential customer feel secure.

Be comprehensive and direct. A first-time visitor to your site is likely to come back to purchase a product if you managed to inform him during the first visit. Inform, don't advertise: avoid sentences such as “the best...ever”. Explain why your prod-

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uct is good instead. In other words, the visitor to your site is an intelligent person, treat him accordingly. Even if he's not.

👉 Access

The very expression "e-commerce" implies a transaction. Just as you appreciate your butcher saying 'hello' as you enter his shop, the site must provide the user with the impression that you deal with him in a personal way, that he is unique. This can be done by either placing a cookie in the user's cookie file or by requiring him to log on to your website every time he visits. By doing so, the system can recognize a returning buyer and take action accordingly (displaying a personalized welcome message, for example.)

👉 Payment gateway

This is the entity that handles transactions between a merchant and an acquirer. The payment gateway provider is a company that provides code and/or software for an e-commerce site to enable it to transfer information from its shopping cart to the acquiring bank, and through the rest of the credit card transaction. You'll have to carefully select the payment gateway provider, since there are significant differences from one to another in terms of technical reliability, cost, etc..

The sale

An e-commerce website is a new shop you are opening online. It has its entrance door (home page), its departments (main categories), shelves (sub categories), the products and the cashier (payment gateway).

But to make it successful you have to invent the salesman, to think about the promotion and to create an environment that will generate traffic on the site and boost sales.

■ The products

Hard to believe, but a French company managed to sell a Gas Cylinder Bottling Factory to a U.S. company online! Managers only met to sign the deal... Of course some products are easier to sell. This example just goes to show that almost everything can be sold online. Some products are just adequate, others less.

To increase sales, most platforms offer a cross-selling feature. This is a feature that will display a hair dryer with a sentence like "would you be interested in this product?" if the client already added a hairbrush to the basket.

■ The price

Do you know what products or services are so profitable that you can significantly discount them and still make a healthy profit? Or products that are worth selling at a loss in order to attract a new customer. Do it!

What types of incentives can you use to encourage prospective customers to make their first purchase? A gift for new customers? Participation in a draw to win an around-the-world cruise for 10 people?

A satisfied customer is likely to become a returning customer. Once you've built trust and gained the person's confidence, you have also gained their loyalty.

Another interesting application can offer discounts to people who recommended your site to their friends or relatives. Each one of your existing clients has a reference, so if someone buys and mentions the referral, that person gets a 10% discount on his next purchase.

■ The distribution/logistics

By nature, e-commerce is a remote sale. The shipment cost has to be either included in the price you display next to the product, or calculated once the buyer has completed a purchase. For light shipments, express delivery couriers have designed special rates for e-commerce, so contact them to find out what is the most interesting in term of service and price. Always opt for the best service if the price difference is not that significant.

You can also work with the courier to offer several products in packaging that has been optimized to lower the shipment cost. This can be tempting for the client if introduced by a phrase like : "save 50% on transport and get two products instead of one..."

Check out the upcoming issues of the Ecomleb journal for more details on each of those topics.

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