

Developing a Winning Ecommerce Strategy

By Lee Traupel

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One bright spot on the economic horizons around the world seems to be continued consumer spending and ecommerce is clearly a part of this, with sales estimated to be in excess of \$9.9 Billion in the next three months according to ACNielsen. But, there is a dark cloud hovering over this landscape called poor ecommerce web site design. Let's explore some of the reasons why consumers are not reaching for their credit cards after perusing an ecommerce web site.

There is a huge knowledge gap about how the web is really driving online and offline commerce. A recent eCommercePulse survey of more than 33,000 surfers conducted by Nielsen/Net ratings and Harris Interactive indicates ecommerce sites are driving more purchases offline (phone, catalogue, retail store sales) than online. Consumers are using the web to effortlessly compare features and pricing – then, calling the company or visiting their local retail store to make a purchase. Clearly many companies need to factor this information in when they analyze their online and offline marketing expenditures and related ROI.

Unfortunately many firms have allocated a disproportionate amount of resources for advertising and not enough on good web site design and back end infrastructure. It's critical to make the market aware of a site, but if the potential customers are not presented with the right navigation and menus (read information architecture) they will not buy. Case in point, according to recent Dataquest surveys (and others) between 20-40% of most users don't purchase because they can't figure out how to easily move around the web site.

Many firms fail to properly integrate their ecommerce components with the overall site design. The in-house developers or outside design firm concentrate on the sexy parts of the web site design process (the graphics, branding, look and feel) and only focus on the ecommerce process after the primary web site design is completed – making ecommerce an afterthought.

Many ecommerce web sites don't even list a phone number, arbitrarily forcing people to contact the company electronically – this is a real problem, as many people don't want to use e-mail or forms as their primary means of communicating, they want the immediacy of the telephone.

It surprising, but approx 30% of ecommerce sites don't have a search capability that actually works – in many cases it just returns gobblygook. This is a real irritant for many online shoppers who want to find goods and services quickly and efficiently – the need for speed should be the ecommerce merchants marketing mantra and a good search capability gives users a way to quickly find

products.

One of the most important parts of any web site is the home or index page, as it aggregates the design elements and information architecture. So many index page are cluttered and poorly designed, loaded with poor graphics, bad menu structures, oddball words or my absolute least favorite, 30-60 second Flash animation sequences which force the user to sit and stare at a blank screen while the animation loads.

According to a recent Zona Research and Keynote Systems Report released earlier this summer over \$25 Billion (USD) was lost in ecommerce due to users abandoning the web site prior to a purchase being made or during the process. The users just gave up because the load times (how fast it takes a page to be displayed in a browser) were painfully slow. Today's online shoppers aren't a real patient group, they want information presented in 12-18 seconds, or they are off to another site that works.

Privacy statements are about as exciting as filing taxes (unless you know your getting a refund) – they are out of necessity filled with legal terminology that needs to be addressed succinctly and in a way that makes a consumer feel comfortable about doing business with an ecommerce web site. Unfortunately, many ecommerce web site privacy statements look like an afterthought or are so “attorney driven” (three pages – who has time to read this?) people are turned off by them. It's very important that a privacy statement be a compromise between legal and marketing.

We are a full service ad agency so I don't mind shooting arrows in the direction of my peers – too much attention is being placed on web site advertising metrics (clickthrough rates, certified traffic to substantiate ad rates, etc.) and not enough on how people find and use an ecommerce web site. The industry standard web site analysis tool is Web Trends, but one of the least understood aspects of this product is tracking how people find and move around a web site via reports which can be pulled from the server log files; i.e. where did the visitors come from, what pages do they visit, how long do they stay, what are their traffic patterns, etc. Ecommerce companies should be analyzing these “digital customer tracks” to better understand how to improve their front end marketing processes and back end web site design.

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