



Considerations when choosing an e-commerce solution

20/07/2012

Table of Contents

Introduction

- 1: Choosing a Service provider**
- 2: Functionality of your E-Commerce System**
 - 2.1 Privacy**
 - 2.2 Search Functionality**
 - 2.3 Site Navigation**
 - 2.4 Back-office Connectivity**
 - 2.5 Sell Price Updating**
 - 2.6 Stock Feeds**
 - 2.7 Credit / Debit Card Payments**
 - 2.8 Marketing Integration**
 - 2.9 Smart Phone Applications**
 - 2.10 Support for Business Customers**
 - 2.11 Reporting**
 - 2.12 Product Attribute Display & Parametric Filtering**
 - 2.13 Delivery Charges**
 - 2.14 Relational Data**
 - 2.15 Printer Consumables Finder**
- 3: Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)**
- 4: Product Data**
- 5: Summary**



What should dealers consider when choosing an e-commerce solution?

Introduction

Dealers who do not fully embrace the Internet do so at their peril. Those with good, full e-commerce sites are generally in growth and those with poor sites are generally in decline.

There is some functionality such as order authorisations and account management which is required on a Business to Business (B2B) site and not on a Business to Consumer (B2C) site. The navigation around the site and the display of products should however be the same irrespective of the target market.

Do you want a combined site offering both B2B and B2C facilities which potentially could have conflicting pricing strategies or is your market purely B2B or B2C? Not all solutions treat this in the same way, so be clear of your business strategy before choosing a partner.

What customers expect from the Internet and Best Practice is changing at an incredibly fast rate. The days when a basic order-taking site was good enough, as it would be used in conjunction with a paper catalogue, are past. The best E-Commerce sites do the job of a good telesales person, cross and up-selling, offering special deals which are likely to be of interest to the customer based on their shopping basket and previous buying history.

The purpose of this document is not to recommend any specific solutions but to identify the facilities and functionality that should be considered when choosing a site.

When talking to a salesperson who is telling you all the areas where their solution is better, turn the conversation around, and present them with a list of the features and functionality that you are looking for. Request answers in writing, especially if they are promising new features in the near future.

First Part of the Process

The customer ordering office stationery for their office is the same person who spends hours each week on the Internet at home, whether ordering groceries, clothes, books, DIY products or a new TV. They expect all the sites to work in broadly the same way, irrespective of the products ranged. They also expect a Google search to take them straight to the page where they can buy the product.

Some things will vary according to the product, for example when purchasing a television or washing machine; a customer may well wish to use a compare facility and customer reviews will be of benefit; however if purchasing copier paper or EOS consumables, such facilities will be of little use.

The first part of the process should be to look at the sites that work best. Which sites have you found easiest to use, which sites have persuaded you to spend more than you originally

intended? When you have identified such sites, work out how and why they are better.

Once you have made a list of the sites that you have found that work best, you then need to look at two areas: choosing your provider and considering the functionality that you want and need to be able to sell more products.

1: Choosing a Service Provider

Among the questions you should consider asking are:

- Can the software company provide reference sites and evidence of delivering successful projects of a similar size in your industry?
- Are they using the latest technology? For example, what are their plans for HTML5, which is likely to become the preferred internet environment?
- Is their technology proprietary or is it based on one of the many Open Source shopping carts?
- How financially stable is the company?
- How many developers do they have?
- Can they demonstrate formal processes covering:
 - Specification
 - Delivery of customised elements
 - Bug testing and fixing
 - Version Control
 - Design
 - Training
 - Support
- What is their support policy? Is it an annual contract or do they charge for support by the hour?
- Where does the site sit and what is the historic downtime of the servers, how much load/traffic can they take?
- What is the disaster recovery policy?
- Recently many 'drop ship' looking sites were hit hard by Google's Panda release which removed them from their indexing and caused a huge loss of business for many dealers. This shows how much power Google truly holds. This particular issue affected primarily B2C dealers, if possible check with other dealers to see if they have encountered any particular problems in this area and how they addressed them.

2: Functionality of Your E-Commerce System

Once the provider has answered the above questions to your satisfaction, you then need to deliberate over the functionality that you need and that the potential system on offer can deliver. There are a number of aspects to this that you need to examine.

2.1 Privacy

- Cookies – does the site adhere to the new legislation?
- Removal of sales data upon request

2.2 Search Functionality

This must have some intelligence in order to return products when spelling is incorrect such as two letters transposed.

It is known that customers tend to search in the plural, i.e. "Chairs", so it is essential that the

search for Chairs actually returns a single “Chair”.

Can you, as a dealer add key words such as No 45 or 45A for a popular HP cartridge, or does the provider undertake this work?

2.3 Site Navigation

Some form of product indexing and drill down is required.

You need to find out:

- How does this work?
- Can you as a dealer define how it is done or is it hard-coded into the system already?
- Does it use a known classification such as UNSPSC or the BOSS Industry Standard Product Classification (ISPC) Code?

Where there are large quantities of similar products, the ability for customers to filter product lists by key attributes – such as size or colour - is becoming commonplace and will be particularly important as the use of smart phones and tablet computers increases.

2.4 Back-office connectivity

- How will you keep your Back office system synchronised with your E-Commerce solution?
- How will orders be passed from the E-Commerce System to the Back Office system and then on to your supplier?
- Is there a direct live link between the Back-office System and E-Commerce or is there a time delay in updating information?
- How much information is pulled from the back office and is there a need for duplication in the E-Commerce System?

2.5 Sell Price Updating

- Is the selling price updated from the back office system or directly on the e-commerce system?
- If it is the latter, are there attributes (pieces of data) that can be defined to apply pricing such as a price band letter or must pricing be uploaded at SKU level.
- Is there the facility for setting scheduled/seasonal price updating on a range of products

2.6 Stock Feeds

- Does the site have the ability to take stock feeds from your supplier or suppliers and either display that the stock is available or flag products where there is no stock or the stock is getting low?
- Can you decide how to flag zero stock products, for example ‘in stock’ ‘call for stock’ messages etc rather than no stock? This helps avoid dropped baskets.
- Does the site have the ability to place XML orders with your suppliers if this facility is not handled by your back office systems?
- Are there any reference sites using this facility?

2.7 Credit/Debit Cards

- Are credit and debit cards accepted and authorised?
- Does the provider offer an integrated payment solution or 3rd party payment gateway? If so, this will require protection of stored credit cards transactions

- HTTPS – Secure certificates
- If information is retained, is this cleared down after a period of time, to adhere to security policies?

2.8 Integration of your marketing activity into the E-Commerce solution

- Is there seamless integration from social media and email marketing directly into not just the site but also the specific product or product range you may be promoting outside the site?
- Does the site have a bulk email facility?
- Is this integrated or 3rd party (mail chimp etc)
- Is there integrated reporting on sales conversions from the email marketing?

2.9 Smart Phones Applications

- Does the site support a smart phone application to allow a scan of a symbol to link to the product?
- Does it support Aztec codes? Aztec Codes are one of three 2-D symbologies; along with QR Codes and Data Matrix that can be read by mobile devices.
- Is the smart phone application fully integrated with the ecommerce platform enabling a customer to simultaneously populate the same basket from the website on their desktop and from their smart phone?
- If using a smartphone for ordering the customer may want to use it to restock their stationery cupboard, not all items will be barcoded, does the ecommerce solution give them the ability to produce a barcoded reorder sheet they can scan.
- Does the application have support for sales representative ordering as well as customer ordering?
- Are there versions for iphone and Android devices?

2.10 Support for business buyers

- Does the solution have full support for business customers, who want to split order lines by cost centres, charge them to different billing accounts and set approval limits on orders based on value, period budgets, etc?
- Can the product selection be filtered per customer to remove any products that they don't want their staff purchasing due to contract conflict with another supplier
- If it is a big corporate buyer they may well be using systems such as SAP and want purchases integrated with their purchasing ledger to avoid re-keying purchase orders and to assist invoice matching and payment. Check that the solution has support for this, it is often referred to as Round Trip or Punchout integration and can help win bigger contracts.

2.11 Reporting

- What reporting is available? Not just on orders taken, but baskets built and then not ordered as well as potential customers browsing the site who then did not add any products to a basket?
- Is there the facility for external reporting/charts services to mobile phone?
- Is there reporting on products customers are searching for but not finding?
- Is there reporting for related purchases?
- Can you see what products are being viewed and purchased most?
- Can reports be made available to the customer so they can undertake their own analysis of purchases by staff member, delivery location, cost centre, etc?

2.12 Product Attribute Display and Parametric Filtering

- The ability to support full parametric searching and filtering is becoming increasingly important. This enables users to rapidly narrow their searches down to the most relevant products that meet their criteria with just a few mouse clicks: e.g. find a desk that is: “Cantilever”, “Right Hand” “With Pedestal” and finished in “Beech”. Check that your e-commerce and data provider solutions support this.
- If the site supports this then a compare facility should display matched attributes on the same line. For example, a search for copier paper will then allow parametric filtering by paper weight; paper size or colour.

2.13 Delivery Charges

- Common research suggests that delivery charges are one of the key drivers in conversion rates for both B2B and B2C e-commerce and as such are an important element on which to have granular and extensive control.
- Does the site have the ability to set delivery charges by product type, weight or size, order value and customer?
- Can it assign different charges dependent on destination, such as Highlands and Islands.

2.14 Relational data

- Can the site use relational data such as “larger pack”, “smaller pack”, “higher quality”, “value alternative”, “complement” and “alternative”? Such a facility, assuming that the data used is so coded, will allow cross and up-selling, increasing both the average order value and the browsing conversions.

2.15 Printer Consumables Finder

- With EOS consumables now accounting for up to 40% of office stationery sales, a tool to facilitate the search for the correct consumables should be considered to be essential.
- How often is this data updated and where does the supplier source it from?

3: Search Engine Optimisation (SEO)

Firstly you need to ask “can I afford not to accept browsing business” even if the answer to this is currently no, it may well be different in a year or two. Some of the newer entrants into the office products market, selling entirely over the Internet are taking a share of the B2B market without using any of the traditional marketing methods.

Assuming you decide that SEO is or will be important, will your E-Commerce Provider have the facility to undertake this automatically from the data on your site? Although its algorithms are constantly changing, the main aim of Search Engines like Google is to deliver the most relevant landing pages to users using its search facility. It does this by using the structure and textual links in web sites and e-commerce systems to evaluate their relevance to the page that is delivered up.

From this it follows that the ability to design the structure and navigation of your store to serve up your product pages as uniquely as possible is the most important element in Search Engine Optimisation. Template web stores are stores that are of identical structure but with the branding changed. Clearly these do not provide SEO advantages as the structure and links are identical.

Some questions to consider include:

- How does your store support SEO friendly links?
- Do they offer a design service or do you pick from a template selection?
- Does your data provider deliver data that enables you to create your own, individual combinations of metadata (descriptive information about a particular data set, object, or resource) which enables you to gain advantage over your competitors?
- Who in your organisation is going to design the way your store is navigated? Because this design usually generates the links that are scanned by search engines like Google, this is one of the most critical areas for both SEO and ease of use.
- Does it have deep content management facilities or only on the landing page?
- How customisable are the menus/hyperlinks/banners/pictures and again landing page only, or can you customise at a sub-page level?

You need to be able to extract your data, carry out modifications and additions and then present this to the search engines. To maximise the benefit, your upload must be different to your competitors, search engines like change, so you need to be presenting additional or revised data as often as possible.

It is crucial that you continually seek better, deeper and more informative data to add to your sites. Much of the benefit that can be generated from search engines is outside the site content itself and requires 'back links' – that is, links into the site from other web pages. Once you have started you must continually invest in optimisation of the site and its external reputation.

4: Product Data

The product data and the site functionality must work together and there are lots of questions to answer in relation to this, they include:

- What data sets do you wish to display?
 - Data from one or two wholesalers?
 - If both wholesalers are loaded is it intelligent enough to only show one sku rather than two with different codes?
 - Can it apply automatic price markups to supplier cost prices and de-duplicate products based on the supplier offering best price with available stock?
 - Products from smaller regional suppliers?
 - Additional products from manufacturers not stocked by the Wholesalers
 - Specific stock for some of your customers?
 - Own products and imagery

When you have answered these questions, you then need to consider:

- Where will the rich product data and media come from?
- Who will load the data and who will maintain the data?

It will be much easier for you if your e-commerce provider or even your data provider loads and maintain the product data – can these jobs be automated? That said, if you have specific customer stock, you will need the facility to either check that your data provider will create this for you, or upload and maintain this data yourself.

Suppliers of Product Data

Below is a list of considerations when looking for your supplier of product data.

Header Description

This should not be too long or short, effectively describes the product, should not contain abbreviations, should be consistent and the data contained in the same order across all products.

More Detailed or Bullet Text

This should be as extensive as possible to give all the information a customer requires to make an informed buying decision. Ideally limited to around 10 key benefit features and in short sentences. (Amazon, for example recommends 5 features of around 60 characters each but these may be short for business machines). They should SELL the product and not be a repeat of the specifications of a product and contain the most powerful benefits.

Marketing Text

Benefits led description that should be different to the bullet text and be a paragraph of at least 100 words which accurately describes the product in a way that encourages the user to make a purchase.

Product-Specific Attributes

For consistency and for the ability to generate easy to read product pages, these should be provided in individual fields. The fields must be consistent for each type of product. Individual fields also need to be combined into readable text strings for display, with appropriate linking phrases.

Where there are lots of attributes, such as those describing business machines for example, they need to be grouped under logical sub headings so that users can easily read the on-line data sheets created from them.

The ability to support full parametric searching and filtering is becoming increasingly important so you should check that your solution supports this.

The key is to avoid repetition of any data in each product record and remember that it needs to promote and sell the product as well as simply describe the product.

Relationship Data

This includes accessories and consumables related to the main product, larger pack, higher quality, etc which allows for cross and up-selling.

Images

The most important piece of product data: the prime image should be the exact product being sold, not a group shot, nor a different colour or size. A 300 pixel wide image is acceptable for the base image but increasingly, good E-Commerce sites offer a Zoom facility. To accommodate this, a 1000 pixel or greater resolution image is required.

Prime images must be on a white background and should fill 85% of the frame and preferably stored as a jpeg. Can your site display additional images, in which case you should be looking for multiple images of products, especially the higher value, more technical items such as printers and cameras?

Remember that large images like this for large quantities of products require very large file sizes. Check how these images will be provided and how your application can support them.

Video, Flash and Fly around Images

Rich media will become more common and eventually the norm. Rotating images are going out of fashion as the trend to use videos increases. However it is worth noting that 'Flash'

technology is now a legacy format and whilst it may need to be supported in the short term, you should be focussing on newer technologies.

Manufacturers Brochures and Manuals

Normally supplied as PDF's, these are becoming more common and should be considered as essential support material, especially for high tech products such as video projectors.

Care of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) Data Sheets

Some customers will insist that these are available on your site.

Dimensional Data

Size and weight of the product, may be required by the customer or to set the delivery charge.

5: Summary

You are very unlikely to find an e-commerce provider who can deliver all the features and facilities listed. Likewise no data provider can currently supply perfect data with all the attributes listed above as they are dependent on the data being available from the manufacturers. You need to decide which are the most important for your current and near future requirements.

Beware of verbal promises from sales staff – get it in writing. Most importantly make a list of your requirements and request a written response, known as a specification of requirements. Consider very carefully how much of your time will be spent if you have to load and maintain all the product data on your site. Would you be better off if the software house or data provider undertakes this work?