



BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

TOP FIVE WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR ECOMMERCE WEBSITE TODAY



eststrategyfirst

A proprietary report prepared by eststrategyfirst

BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

Top 5 Ways to Improve Your Website Today



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INTRODUCTION

The news is good! Online sales continue to rise, surpassing \$100 billion in 2006 and growing at about 25% per year. One-third of the total U.S. population has made an online purchase in the past three months. A full 63% of consumers use the web to research products prior to buying.

However, this good news brings new pressures to most online merchants, since increasingly savvy consumers fuel this growth. They bring growing expectations and demands forcing companies to work harder than ever to make their sites interesting, easy to use and competitive. Further, the success of online giants such as Amazon and eBay puts particular pressure on mid-size and regional department stores, on specialty retailers and brands, and on direct marketing and catalog companies, as users flock to the “one stop shopping” ease of the mammoth retailers.

Smart merchants recognize and embrace these challenges and are on the lookout for ways to bring a superior experience to their customers. The purpose of this guide is to stimulate the kind of thinking, problem solving and innovation that leads to powerful customer experiences and sustainable sales growth across channels.

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SETTING THE STAGE

BUILD PERSPECTIVE + LAY THE RIGHT FOUNDATION

Before you can meaningfully evaluate your website, there are some essential questions to ponder. Well thought out answers will help you construct the proper foundation and end with a meaningful site assessment.

Just Who Are They, Anyway?

Truly knowing your visitors, their motivations, their typical online activities, and most importantly, their specific online

goals, is probably the single most important precursor to any site evaluation. One highly effective method is to develop personas. Much is written about persona development and scenario-based design, and if the concept is new to you, it is well worth further study.

However, even a novice can tackle the technique. Consider the following “typical” goal statement:

“Our customer is typically a female between the ages of 30 and 45 and comes to our site to buy home decorative items.”

Now look at this excerpt from an **estategyfirst** client’s first rework of the same goal statement, after profiling with personas:

*“...My name is Susan and I am a marketing manager for a large company in the City. My husband and I recently bought our first home, it’s great! Urban, almost 100 years old and loaded with character. I’m on the site today looking to buy unique linens, bathroom accessories and wall accents for our guest bed and bathroom. I really hope to find affordable, unique items that look like purchases from trips abroad, global bazaars or international markets. I really need to get my products quickly. **www.CompanyXZY.com** is my favorite online store, but I need my things ASAP and if I can’t easily find what I’m looking for today I’ll go through the list of my other favorites so I can complete my purchase quickly.”*

Even stating user goals very simply, such as “I want to buy a set of monogrammed bath towels”, or “I want to find out if a purchase can be picked up in-store”, or “I’m looking to check the status of my recent order”, will add structure and simplicity to your evaluation.

Leveraging personas for actionable insight into how your site meets your consumers’ goals is a practical and effective way to avoid company vs. customer centric missteps. Designing to specific customer goals will also help you capitalize on the shopping leadership role you are granted by your best customers.

Where else do they go online?

Since the perspective of your users is an integral component of your website evaluation, it’s important to know what they experience as they browse and shop other sites. This accumulation of their online experience plays a significant role in setting their expectations. Do your competitors offer similar features? Are their sites organized like yours? Is your site the design leader with a highly professional look and feel, or does your site lag



Scenario Design

Your users are real people. Bring them...and their objectives...to life.

behind, a virtual “stepchild” to your print, catalog and other advertising collateral?

Don’t forget to look at other types of sites your users are visiting. Are they news junkies, making daily visits to news portals like MSNBC or CNN? Are they financial or business professionals, routinely visiting the Wall Street Journal? Maybe your users are the ultimate fashionistas, scouring the internet for blogs, communities and portals for the latest trends, celebrity fashions, and to connect with other users who share their passion for fashion.

Can you conquer mission disconnect?

Unfortunately, the impact of a company’s true online mission on their website is usually underestimated. In website design, as in most aspects of business, trade-offs are routine. Understanding your online priorities helps you objectively determine the relative importance of your site review findings and prioritize them at the highest strategic level.

A common example of mission disconnect is around website resource investments. Some companies critically under fund website and online marketing activities relative to other channel investments, at the same time claiming they want to create cutting edge user experiences and drive a high percentage of direct sales online. Companies often set aggressive online sales targets, but fail to

articulate this goal throughout the organization and worse, neglect to support it when internal channel-management or budget conflicts arise.

Constructing a truly powerful website requires that you be willing to establish and articulate clear internal priorities, particularly around your dedication to eCommerce.

How do they behave, really?

Before diving into a heuristic review of your website, dive into your web analytics software. It's a great way to really understand where users go on your site, what they do when they get there, and where most of them leave. One estrategyfirst client determined that over 60% of their users were dropping off between the start and completion of checkout. Knowing exactly where in advance of the review allowed them to focus on the shopping cart, checkout and sign-up processes, where the right changes and a move to best practices led to significant sales and satisfaction gains.

Analyzing common entry and exit pages, along with the characteristics of successful paths and unexpected drop off points, is an excellent precursor to any qualitative site review.

+ Know Your Online Mission +

High profile brands often state that maximizing online sales and creating top-notch user experiences are their most important online objectives. However, when put to the test, those same brand powerhouses often deploy sites with elegant images and little more. Product manufacturers are prone to overloading important pages with unreadable or irrelevant content and miss great sales opportunities by deeply burying key product content and providing confusing paths to purchase. Browsing, shopping, researching are often very user-unfriendly experiences.

Brand, design and function must work in concert and corporate and user goals must be synergized. Truly successful brand agents strive relentlessly to bring their brand and its values to life online, while embracing usability, selling and corporate information objectives. Sacrificing goal focused design, friendly shopping navigation and tools, clear calls to action, rich, accessible content, marketing messages, and readable type to other interests or inattention leaves precious sales and brand equity on the table.

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A BLUEPRINT FOR SUCCESS

FIVE WAYS TO REVIEW + IMPROVE TODAY

Ask almost any savvy executive about the importance of their website and the resounding answer is that it's extremely important...crucial to their brand, to sales from all channels and even to internal operations. However, ask them if they are happy with their website and you're likely to hear about their never ending or even failed efforts to realize their vision. Why this crucial breakdown? Pull back the covers and you'll usually find companies that haven't strictly determined what's wrong, and most important, the precise remedy.

There is an answer to this challenge! Just as the Olympic judge assesses an athlete's performance using a set of clear criteria, you must impartially evaluate your website using a tested methodology. Anticipating customer needs and catering to seemingly individual whims may sound like an impossible undertaking, but breaking your assessment into straightforward pieces helps drive online solutions you will embrace with enthusiasm.

This dispassionate look at how your site stacks up in the eyes and wallets of your users is invaluable. Undoubtedly, support for your post review recommendations will be influenced by your company's culture and priorities, but

having cold facts at hand will certainly speed up awareness and receptivity to the changes that ultimately drive measurable online and multi-channel success and satisfaction improvements.

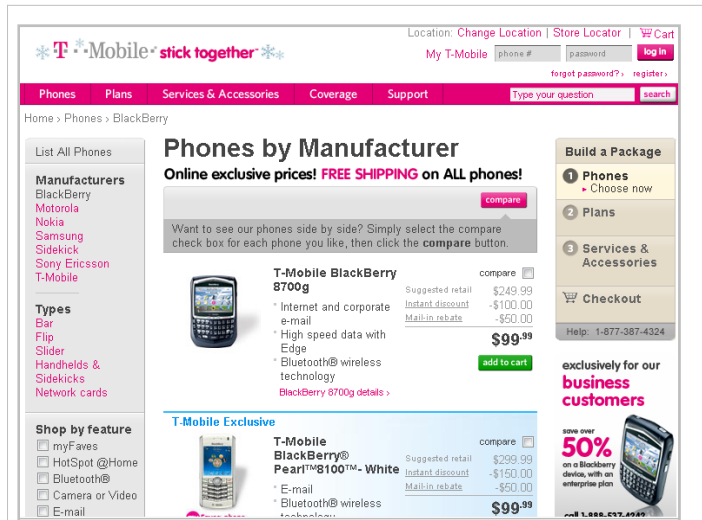
+ Internal Website Review Pitfalls +

Ambiguity. Statements like: “It’s not as good as our competition...”, “I don’t really like the layout of our pages...” and “It’s too hard to use...” may sound like helpful assessments, but on closer look are actually quite vague and do little to identify exactly what is actually wrong. Without specificity, corrective measures are hard to develop and resulting changes miss the mark.

Bias. Bias surfaces in two ways. Sometimes it’s explicit. The fact that considerable energy and resources were committed to the site’s design often inhibits objective evaluation and keeps the most knowledgeable stakeholders from openly admitting and discussing challenges. Other times, issues are categorically dismissed or don’t surface due to the intimate familiarity the company and its employees have with the website, including its design, functionality and architecture.

Subjectivity. Subjectivity is one of the most difficult obstacles for internal reviewers to overcome. By its very nature, the process of evaluating a site is subjective. Further, expressing opinions in an emotional or arbitrary fashion is completely natural. Unfortunately, such expressions as: “There is too much black” and “It’s too busy” are vague, lack concrete detail and lead to endless design debates and questionable solutions.

+++



T-Mobile Scores a User Experience Home Run

Category names and links are precise + unambiguous, categories are logically grouped + easy to grasp, and important links persist throughout the site. Great visual cues too.

OPPORTUNITY #1

HELP USERS QUICKLY FIND WHAT THEY WANT

Whether it’s a hunt for detailed product information, a search for purchasing options, a quest for the perfect accessory, or a quick logon to check installation instructions, users demand to be able to effortlessly find what they are looking for...the instant they land on your site. Designing a site that makes it easy for users to find what they want is the backbone of a successful user experience, and starts with the basics, such as robust navigation, conformance with culturally embedded standards, and scanable, readable and clickable pages. Don’t be fooled by the terminology; the fact is that these “basics” are the nuts and bolts of user experience. As often as not, this is where merchants fail to deliver a winning experience.

Go all-out for good navigation

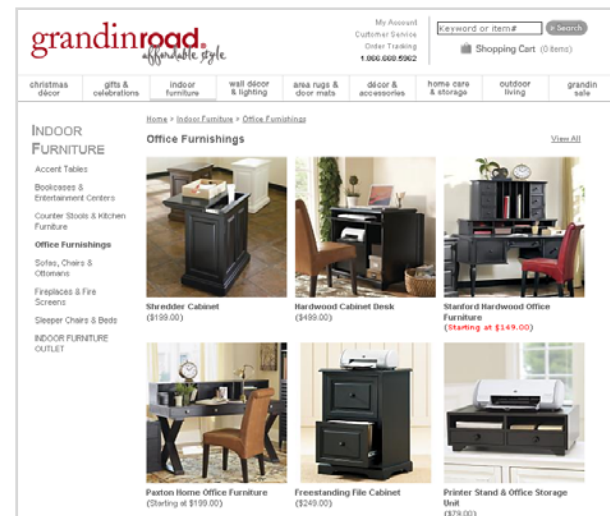
Jupiter Research reports that 65% of online customers rate “Site Is Easy to Navigate” as the most influential factor in

their decision to continue shopping. It's easy to see why making core categories and essential links *recognizable, persistent and easy to understand* is one of the smartest things you can do to create a rewarding user experience. Getting your high value visitors to exactly where they want to go translates to measurable sales and loyalty. Providing straightforward access to core content, especially product, shipping and ordering details, is paramount.

Navigation 4-point checklist

- ✓ *Trade-in clever or cute category labels for straightforward, unambiguous ones.* Category names should be precise, clearly describe their contents, and make it obvious what subcategories, products or other content is included within.
- ✓ *Group similar categories and links logically together.* A common technique is to think of your website like a house and your primary navigation its rooms. Each room has an important purpose and is filled with the things that that relate to its function; each room is further organized with the use of closets, cabinets and drawers, each also holding its own collection of naturally related items.
- ✓ *Bring important links and categories to a high level.* Don't make users dig for frequently accessed categories and content -- make the paths evident starting at the highest level menus. Users need a clear path to their destination and have limited patience for unproductive, trial and error browsing, especially when it comes to finding something very basic, like access to product and purchasing details.
- ✓ *Think beyond the home page.* Not everyone enters your site through the home page. In fact, the more effective the marketing and acquisition effort, the deeper the user is linked into the site, so a look at all the site sections and many, many pages will spot inconsistencies and abstractions. This exercise is

particularly helpful in determining exactly what menus and categories are most important and should persist regardless of where the user is in the site.



Navigation is the user's roadmap

Like Grandin Road, make it easy for customers to stay oriented + focused on their browse or buy mission.

Create scannable, clickable, readable pages

Obsess over your visual presentation and design treatments if you really want your users to jump in and keep clicking. Consumers turn to their favorite retail and manufacturer websites as product authorities; the best customers are brand loyalists primed to purchase. Why do so many websites take users to confusing, hard to read pages that take precious time to figure out? Or, in what is now a sophisticated, interactive media, are they landed on "print-like" or unclickable pages?

Evaluate your site objectively, using the following checklist as a guide. Like your navigation assessment, remember that you are working with an entire site, and look through a variety of your categories and page types.

✓ *Is there a clear visual hierarchy on each page?*

The more important something is, the more prominent it is: larger, bolder, in a distinctive color, set apart with white space, nearer the top of the page, or in some combination of above.

Things that are related logically are related visually: grouped together under a heading, displayed in a similar visual style, placed in a clearly defined area, or 'nested' visually to show what is part of what.

✓ *Is it clear what's clickable?*

Look for clear visual click cues: arrows, buttons, carrots, mouseovers, link highlights, on/off states, subtle underlining, bolding, etc.

✓ *Is the text legible?*

Look for text to be sufficiently large, limited use of knockout type, italicized type, and low contrast background treatments, and for judicious use of upper case only type.

✓ *Is text well organized?*

Look for headlines, sub-heads, paragraphs, and columns, proven ways to drive visual focus and enhance scan and readability.

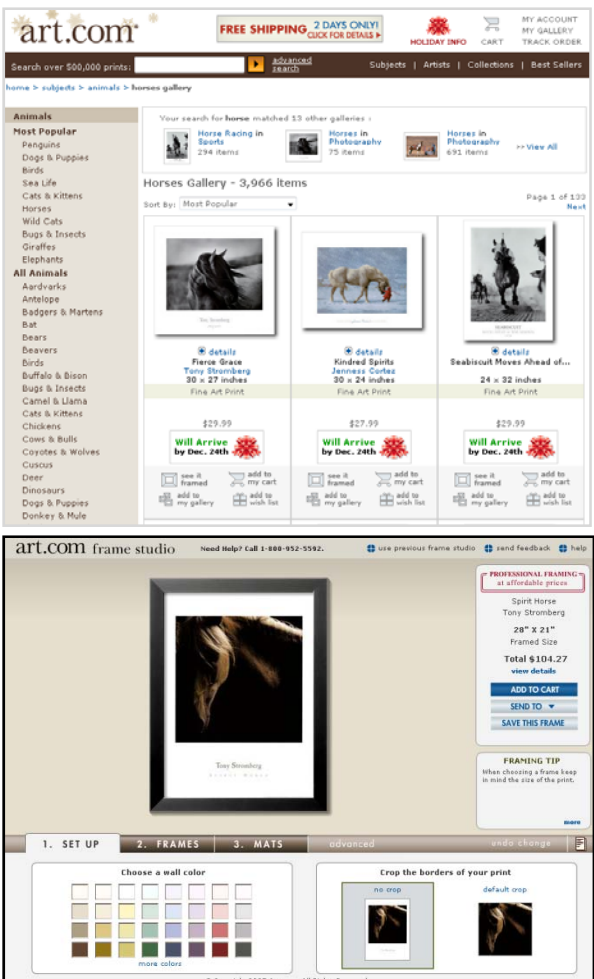
The value of conventions and standards

Just as a table of contents leads chapters in a textbook or the appendix is in the back, websites have routine placements. Easy to grasp web sites have a global (persistent) site header or masthead, the logo resides in the upper left, the shopping menus run across the top and/or down the left-hand side, and the shopping cart access is high on the right, usually in the header.

However, in a noble effort to design sites easily distinguished from one and other, designers may offer you exciting concepts that depart from these and other obvious conventions. Such brilliant designs may be dazzling and hard to resist, but proceed with caution. With fewer than five seconds to capture your user's attention, radically rearranging the basics can force consumers to waste

precious time on orientation instead of diving into your products, services and offers. In short order you will deplete their reservoir of patience and goodwill and hasten site abandons.

Rather than a radical design departure, strive to differentiate your site from competitors by leveraging recognizable brand assets and by highlighting your core brand attributes. Best-in class website design builds on great form and function, and great brands will showcase well, even within the confines of convention.



The screenshot displays two parts of the art.com website. The top part is a product gallery for 'Horses' with a search bar, navigation links, and a list of items like 'Fierce Grace' and 'Kindred Spirits'. The bottom part is the 'frame studio' interface, which includes a 'Choose a wall color' palette, a 'Crop the borders of your print' tool, and a 'PROFESSIONAL FRAMING' summary box with pricing and 'ADD TO CART' buttons.

Effective interactive design

Art.com is a master class in effective interactive design. Well structured navigation. Easy to understand, organized pages. Great use of layout, type, graphics and color to send clear visual cues.

OPPORTUNITY #2

CREATE A FUN + EASY ONLINE EXPERIENCE

Shopping is nicknamed “American’s Favorite Hobby”. Many people find simply heading to the mall fun. However, creating a bona-fide, enjoyable online shopping experience requires a little out of the box thinking. True, exploring products online has some key advantages over shopping, like the convenience of 24x7 access, the ease of home delivery and the sneaky pleasure of browsing in our p.j.’s. However, even with its advantages, the experience usually lacks the punch of the “in-person” activity.

Further, in spite of access to more information, choosing and evaluating items can be surprisingly challenging online: no holding up, turning around or trying on. No testing the lotion, perfume or lipstick; no opening the drawers, fiddling with knobs, rocking in the chair or laying on the mattress. And, if you have questions on just how many cables it takes to “hook up the darn thing”, there’s no helpful sales associate to pick up on your cues and guide you to the right “add-on” installation service. These big differences are just annoying snags for people who enjoy shopping; but for those who don’t they present a colossal hurdle. Often, the thing users want most, rich information, is what ultimately stands in their way. Wading through pages of information leads to boredom, confusion and frustration. You must

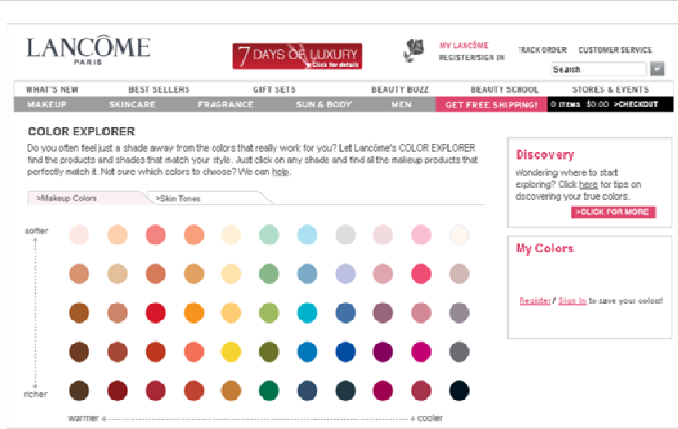
provide extensive information, but users must be able to journey effortlessly and enjoyably through the mountains of important content. Online, they view, read and click instead of touch, manipulate and ask; successful websites demonstrate each day that winning experiences are possible. Follow these guidelines for ideas and build easier, more enjoyable experiences for your customers.

Incorporate the right feature set. You have an enormous opportunity to take your site from mediocre to outstanding by providing relevant tools. In addition to their functional value, such features ultimately showcase products, differentiate your brand and reward your user. Further, category specific functionality helps quickly match up the right products with customers, often helping also serve up pertinent information in understandable, bite-size pieces.

If you’ve mastered site presentation basics, expanding your feature-set is where you can make your site more interesting, more fun and definitely more helpful. Product finders, instructional videos, comparison charts, glossaries, and customer communities are all examples of highly rated features.

Selling shoes? Add a ‘Search By Size’ feature. Selling only shoes? Add it to the global navigation. Selling items to expectant mothers? Add calendar based and countdown functionality accompanied by triggered reminders. Think carefully about the products you sell and the questions people ask: in store, on the phone and by email, and get creative with your solutions.

Lancome has a simple to use, visually driven “Color Explorer” that selects products by favorite make-up color and skin tone combinations. Callaway Golf has an easy to use Flash application that highlights and compares driver characteristics with a simple mouse over on each club. It’s easier, more fun and faster than a traditional comparison chart. Blue Nile has a number of easy-to-use, visually-based features such as a “slider” that helps users navigate the complex factors that make up a diamond purchase.



LANCÔME PARIS

7 DAYS OF LUXURY

MY LANCÔME REGISTER SIGN IN TRACK ORDER CUSTOMER SERVICE

WHAT'S NEW BEST SELLERS GIFT SETS BEAUTY BUZZ BEAUTY SCHOOL STORES & EVENTS

MAKEUP SKINCARE FRAGRANCE SUN & BODY MEN GET FREE SHIPPING! 0 items \$0.00 CHECKOUT

COLOR EXPLORER

Do you often feel just a shade away from the colors that really work for you? Let Lancôme's COLOR EXPLORER find the products and shades that match your style. Just click on any shade and find all the makeup products that perfectly match it. Not sure which colors to choose? We can help.

Discovery

Wondering where to start exploring? Click here for tips on discovering your true colors.

My Colors

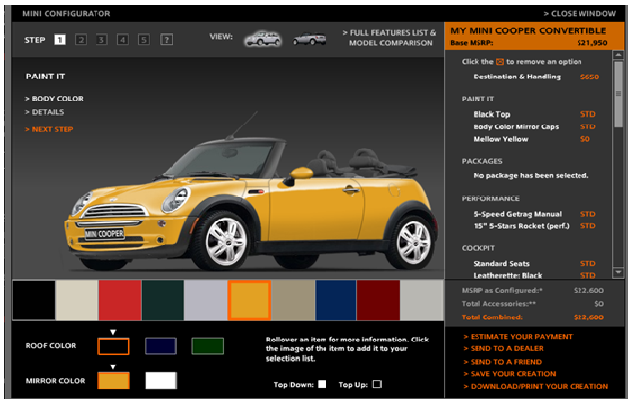
Realize / Save to save your colors!

Lighter & Darker

Weightier & Lighter

Create features that help customers shop online like they think

Lancome’s ‘Color Explorer’ lets you shop for make-up online in the same way you would offline, by considering color favorites and skin-tone considerations.



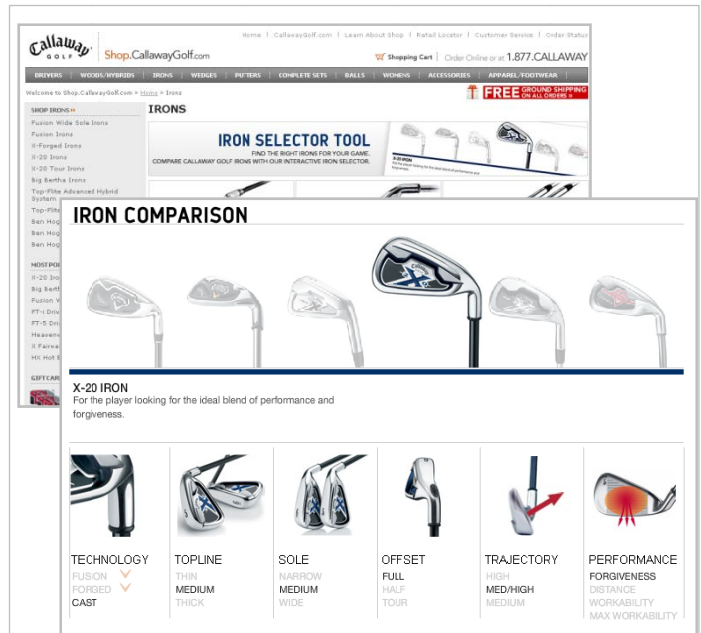
Mini Cooper (www.MiniUSA.com)

Mini Cooper has an engaging “Build Your Own Mini” feature. Design, estimate payments, and send your finished product to a dealer or save and print

Simplify + streamline. User complaints are the birthplace of innovative features. Analytics are a wellspring of task flow improvements. Identify the predominant user paths that do not result in items added to the cart. Identify the most common site abandon points. Look for all the places where your site relies on endless text instructions to tell your user what to do. These and other clues are the perfect starting place for simplifying site processes and adding requisite information, functionality and design changes.

Take the technology out? It may sound paradoxical in the age of electronic retailing, but even with its enormous potential, technology can stand squarely in the way of a rewarding online shopping experience. Making online shopping fun is like walking a tightrope. Spellbinding when executed to perfection, but small missteps may bring troubling consequences.

Countless usability studies, surveys and focus groups tell us that users are eager for sites to add more features. However, we know from the same studies, that new technology and site changes frustrate users, and in reality they will only embrace any new tools when the payoff is high and the complexity low.



A picture is worth a thousand words

Great product content is essential and a core part of the research and buy decision making process. Callaway Golf found a way to make details easy to access and understand online. Rather than just describe their respective driver characteristics with pure text, their iron comparison tool allows the user to quickly see essential facts with simple mouseovers.



Simple tools solve complex problems

These simple Blue Nile sliders instantly help users navigate the complex influences of diamond characteristics on price. Blue Nile proves that a good website requires the right up front thinking about user needs, offline-to-online experience translation, typical product + experience obstacles to purchase, and an investment in information architecture and customer experience.



ProFlowers (www.ProFlowers.com) makes it easy

Complex ordering made simple! Up-sells, suggestive selling, shipping options. Great visual cues + hierarchy, enhancing both usability and marketing or selling objectives like conversion.

Streamline Tasks + Bring the Fun Back in Shopping

ProFlowers.com makes a complex ordering process seem simple, manages to communicate info about incremental shipping costs, and still seamlessly presents two up-sells into the process.

- ✓ Strong visual cues mitigate the need for unusable text instructions, while nothing distracts from the important Order Now button.
- ✓ This company clearly understands the importance of understanding its users' goals and challenges and the elegant solution is no doubt a result of experience and analysis prior to programming.
- ✓ An **strategyfirst** favorite way to identify site areas in urgent need of an experience makeover? We track down all the places where your site relies heavily on text instructions to guide the user. Step outside and think. If you have to explain how, shopping is neither fun nor simple!

What constitutes a payoff? Technology solutions that solve common problems, such as selecting a delivery date, finding the "best match" product, or uploading a gift list. Other payoffs? Comparison charts. Customization, configuration and preview tools. Access to fresh, custom, content and community. The ability to learn first-hand from other consumers or share experiences with fellow enthusiasts. Interactive and entertaining "how-to" information on product use or installation.

Get the idea? Once you start thinking about your users' needs it's easy to come up with options. But take care! With today's revolutionary Rich Internet Applications (RIAs), you will be tempted to roll out new functionality just because you can. Deploy your features, as quickly as possible, but always remember their purpose is to enhance, not complicate, the user experience. The importance of usability cannot be underestimated.

The bottom line is that your customers' investment in your site is accompanied by an unequivocal demand: your features must be intuitive. *Period.* Therefore, as you

review your site for the right RIA and feature additions, whether it's a kitchen design center, a laptop finder, or a closet configurator, remember your job merely starts at the great technology that makes it possible. It's finished when the users like to use it.

OPPORTUNITY #3

BUILD TRUST, CONFIDENCE + LOYALTY

The Internet is ubiquitous, weaving its way in and out of our everyday activities. Its widespread adoption and diverse usage by both consumers and businesses has led to complex multi-channel shopping behaviors. Although many companies still think of their channels as separate and distinct, today's consumer is interacting seamlessly across all, and the convergence of these experiences is building loyalty, purchases and referrals, or doubt, ambivalence and interest in competitors.

When Gomez, Inc. surveyed online shoppers in late 2006, an overwhelming 65% said they would stop or reconsider shopping from a company’s physical store after a bad online experience. The implications of an inferior online experience to the entire business are enormous. Shortsighted thinking, an unwillingness to invest in customer experience and denial about your own site effectiveness may mean you are risking millions of dollars each year if you deliver sub-standard online experiences to your high value customers.

Bring your brand to life

Your website is an open window that exposes your brand to a prying world. Like nosy neighbors, visitors drop in at all hours and under all circumstances. Accordingly, your website is creating millions of impressions each year whether you’ve orchestrated your message or not. What can you do? Size up your site. Is it consistent with your presentation in other media, incorporating the right language, imagery and typography? From a glance, will users know it’s you and what your brand stands for? Does it “feel” like your brand?

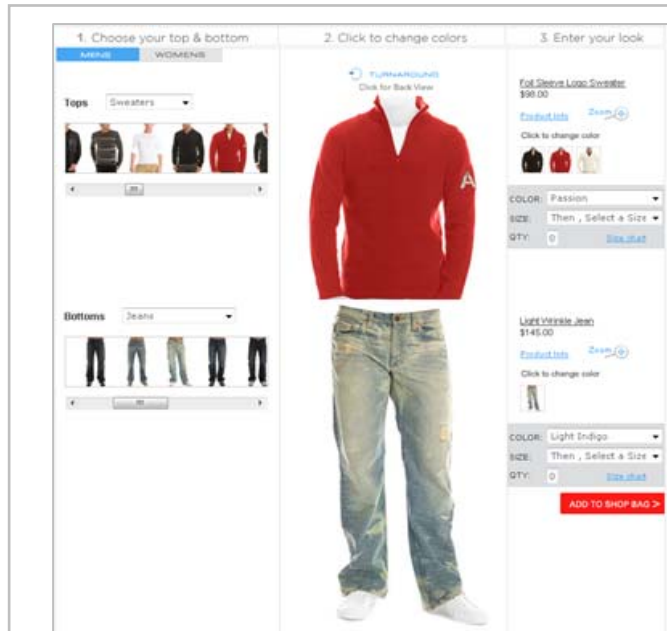
Clearly articulating your brand online is the first stop on the road to trust and loyalty. Online, the potential to cultivate that trust is significant; consumer engagement potential is heightened because the medium is interactive. Your website has a uniquely powerful ability to either reinforce or erode your brand and there is rarely middle ground.

The *appearance* of your website is only a piece of your online brand, which is why some of the world’s leading fashion brands often fail to capture their online community. Reluctant to support their stunning images with the right functionality, strong calls to action, and rich information, and the tendency to under value usability and convention, makes the websites of some of these prestigious, fashion-forward companies very hard to use.

This diminishes the direct selling potential of these otherwise compelling brands. Other mighty brands of all kinds let their websites languish because of organizational politics or outdated channel management practices.

Astute merchants bring their brands to life online by marrying design and interactivity with their core brand attributes. Nike.com does a great job of integrating interactive tools that serve as functional extensions of their “innovation and inspiration” brand objectives. Features include a training log, pace calculator and MP3 sport mixes. A|X Armani Exchange responded to user experience testing and feedback by creating “The Dressing Room”, an interactive feature that allows users to compare tops and bottoms, see front and back views of outfit combinations, and change colors with a simple mouseover. The Buckle serves up a host of interactive experiences in their B Scene lifestyle section.





The A|X Dressing Room

At A|X Armani Exchange, users can create their own looks, view their items from the front and back and mix and match item colors and styles. This and other popular A|X features emerged in response to user feedback, consumer usability testing and a passionate commitment to successful eCommerce in a highly branded environment.



The Buckle: B Scene

Buckle connects with their customer, serving a rich, interactive experience loosely tied to merchandise and definitely focused on the communicated what the brand stands for. Merchandise tie-ins include rock videos featuring Buckle models, as well as a “Denim Rocks” section, filled with photos + videos of rock stars in Buckle apparel.

However, as you tackle ways to communicate your brand online, remember what Forrester Research aptly reminds us: *“Beware of confusing user goals with your business objectives... Your customers don’t wake in the morning and say, ‘I’d like to have an online brand experience today.’”*

Distinguish yourself with service

Comprehensive, dependable service is central to building trust online and as such has the potential to strengthen the consumer-brand relationship. Conversely, in today’s connected world, frustrated customers share their experience with thousands, even millions, of others in online communities. Damage control is challenging at best, as posted comments can appear indefinitely on search engines, waiting for consumption by eager product researchers. Missteps are natural, a blip on the radar, but patterns of poor service spread quickly, and complaints

aggregate. Use the following customer-centric criteria as critical service guidelines.

Make real people and relevant service information accessible. Make it easy for customers to find answers by posting clear links to service information and support policies. Good self-service tools such as product manuals, warranty information and knowledge bases are a must. However, you should also make access to live agents and respective support departments effortless by clearly displaying relevant phone numbers and email addresses. A trademark of today’s thriving online retailers is their “beyond the basics” pre and post purchase support, tailored to their category characteristics and best customer needs. Make it easy for your users to solve problems in their own ways, whether through FAQs, manuals, live agents or any number of robust features, and you make it clear that you value their investment in

your company and products. Demonstrating your commitment to providing pre-and-post purchase answers is an instant trust builder.

Respond quickly to email and live chat queries. Online, turn-around timing really is everything. 24 hours is the outside maximum a customer should have to wait for a response to an email, and send your “we’ve received your request...” acknowledgement immediately. If your site uses chat, prompt responses are essential. If chat agents need to research, they should check-in frequently to keep the customer at ease. Delays lead to frustration and may introduce competition. Recognize that the greater the delay in responding, the greater the likelihood of introducing competition and negative bias. If agents are offline, remove your chat link or clearly post accessible hours. Always reinforce access to self-help, links to email support and your commitment to servicing their request.

Train beyond attitude. A friendly, helpful voice goes a long way, but truly customer-centric brands train agents beyond polite handling of queries, standard scripts and escalation procedures. Rich training in company products and services, and cross-training to facilitate widespread operational understanding, sets truly service oriented companies and their agents apart. Many companies,

BEWARE OF CONFUSING USER GOALS WITH YOUR BUSINESS OBJECTIVES... YOUR CUSTOMERS DON'T WAKE IN THE MORNING AND SAY, 'I'D LIKE TO HAVE AN ONLINE BRAND EXPERIENCE TODAY.'

--FORRESTER RESEARCH

especially manufacturers, are usually best served by creating dedicated groups of online product and service specialists, who handle specific product questions, installation and service details, retailer and dealer network questions, and post purchase support issues. Proper funneling and tracking is instrumental.

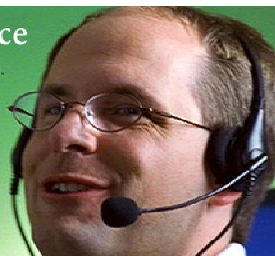
How secure are you?

Demonstrating your commitment to the proper handling of sensitive data is one of the simplest things you can do to build confidence and get a much-appreciated boost in cart completions and your visits to sales ratio. Use this four-point checklist as your guide:

- ✓ Place clearly labeled links to your privacy and security policies next to fields that ask for personal information. Include a short summary of each policy next to all links leading to your policy details.
- ✓ Describe your privacy and security safeguards in straightforward, absolute and friendly terms in the policy details.
- ✓ Provide easy access to company telephone numbers and addresses.
- ✓ Prominently display logos from your trusted third party partners such as Hacker Safe and Thwaite.

top-notch assistance


And it comes with a smile. No kidding. We're here to make certain all your questions, concerns, comments and suggestions are addressed in a timely, and completely satisfactory, manner. Let us help, so the next smile will be yours!



We treat your home like our own!

Call now for great service & exclusive phone deals!

888-354-9898



Norm Thompson + The Inside Store make it clear they want to help

Deliver on site performance

Consumers distrust websites that have technical and performance problem. The more dominant the brand, the higher the expectation for perfection. While your market leadership and visibility may drive repeat visits in spite of site problems, routine problems will place you on the defensive. It will take a series of very positive experiences to restore brand confidence and favorability.

If your company isn't as widely recognized, the bar may not be as high, but you face a greater challenges: visitors who are apprehensive to begin with. As such, they are prone to leave at the first sign of serious or chronic technical issues. In the absence of a very compelling reason, they won't return

The following checklist is designed to help you determine how your site performance stacks up in the eyes of your users. Be objective, a well working site is mission critical.

- ✓ **Do site features work as intended?** For example, does search produce precise, consistent results; do products sort in the proper order; does video play on demand; does view larger bring up a larger image, etc.
- ✓ **Will your users routinely experience major errors** such as site outages, the inability to complete orders, or to use core functions like product search, or store locators?
- ✓ **Is your site frequently down for maintenance?**
- ✓ **In any given session will the average user encounter more than one or two small errors, such as missing images or typos?**
- ✓ **Do pages load quickly and consistently?**
- ✓ **Do common or accidental user keystrokes and actions interfere with the site's performance?**
- ✓ **Does the site place extraordinary demands on the user's system or otherwise interfere with their ability to execute other tasks on their system?**

Guaranteed. Period.®

The world is full of guarantees, no two alike. As a rule, the more words they contain, the more their protection is limited. The Lands' End guarantee has always been an unconditional one. It reads: "If you're not satisfied with any item, simply return it to us at any time for an exchange or refund of its purchase price."

We mean every word of it. Whatever. Whenever. Always. But to make sure this is perfectly clear, we've decided to simplify it further.

GUARANTEED. PERIOD.®

115%
**LOW PRICE
GUARANTEE**

**90
90**
**PLAYABILITY
GUARANTEE**

customer SERVICE

1-877-BLUEFLY
(1-877-258-3359)

call center hours

help
FAQs
contact us
90-day return policy
security policy
privacy policy
international orders
checkout options

 5 out of 5 (Overall Rating)

★ Top 100 Reviewer

Fun N Sun Explosion!, October 1, 20
Submitted by [melo5399](#) from Long Isla
[\(read all my reviews\)](#)

Plant performance:  5 out of 5

Appearance:  5 out of 5

"What a bunch of beauties! I'd never seen so many colors of sunflowers with so many blooms on one plant. The variety was astounding. I planted these in front of my mammoth sunflowers and behind the two foot tall variety. They gave us quite a show. My neighbors would stop with the kids to look. A really vigorous blend. Thanks!"

The Trust + Confidence Trifecta

1 Proudly display your guarantee

Like Lands End, wear your guarantee proudly -- it builds trust and has a measurable impact on customer satisfaction, referrals and sales.

2 Add clear links to privacy and security policies

Links to help, useful information, and privacy, security, and shopping policies build trust and confidence at critical junctures in the shopping or dealer/retailer referral process.

3 Incorporate customer reviews and testimonials

The presence of reviews on your site adds credibility and builds tremendous trust. Endorsement by others, who mirror your users but speak on your behalf, removes anxiety and breeds enthusiasm.

OPPORTUNITY #4

POWER UP YOUR MARKETING + MERCHANDISING

The potential to drive sales is astonishing. Enormous effort goes into product development, advertising and traffic generation. Clearly, the job of your website goes beyond simple order taking. Shrewd merchants jump at this unparalleled opportunity to captivate consumers and turn visits into dollars. Using first-rate merchandising and sharp on-site marketing tactics, you can do the same.

The nuts and bolts of suggestive selling

Suggestive selling is about deploying those on-site tactics that will effectively connect your products with consumers even when they have different needs and shopping styles. Exposing visitors to relevant products and promotions, triggering desire and the itch to act, and eliminating interest in competitive alternatives are all part of the suggestive selling process.

It's easy to forget that even consumers who come into our sites with very specific products in mind may not know about features most relevant to their needs, core product advantages, better matched product alternatives and can't miss accessories and complements. From a marketing perspective, most will not be aware of the latest sales, rebates and other promotional offers available on the day of their visit.

Suggestive selling exposes the right merchandising and marketing information at the right time and in the right context. It plants seeds of curiosity, enthusiasm and longing. These seeds sprout into clicks expressly designed to cement the decision to buy and ideally, the actual purchase.

Appealing to multiple shoppers

Online shopping behavior varies by consumer, but shoppers generally fall into one of two primary styles: directed or "surgical" shoppers, who come in knowing

precisely what they are looking for and what they plan to accomplish, and browsers, who sometimes enter with a plan but by their nature are receptive to and respond to all manner of suggestions.

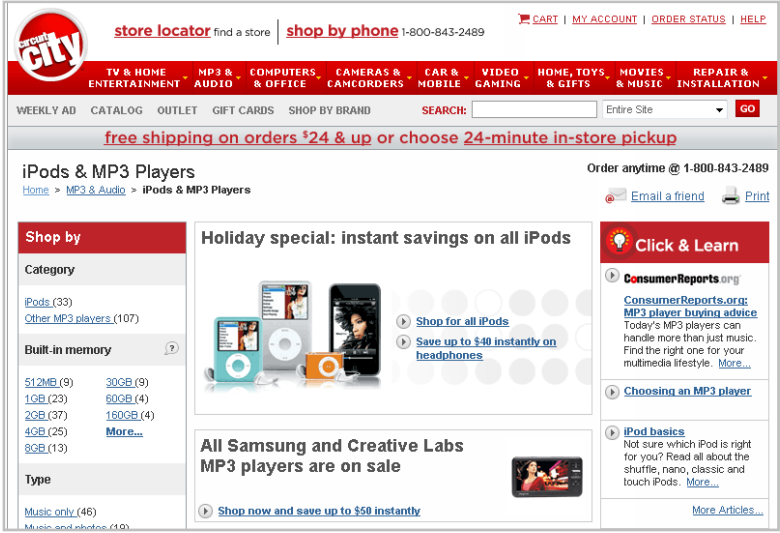
Both surgical shoppers and browsers make routine visits based on a broad interest in your assortment, product category or brand. Tied to personality, shopping behavior usually remains consistent, although it can change based on such things as:

- their research stage
- their previous history with your brand and site
- the number of competitors already introduced into their process
- their immediate visit purpose
- their purchase intent (self, others, etc.)

Effective online merchandising resonates with both kinds of shoppers without encumbering or confusing either one.

Merchandising to the directed shopper. Generally, surgical shoppers will head straight for the search box or to your functional product categories such as sweaters or sofas. The best way to move these customers to purchase is to have logical, clear product categories, an accurate search feature and an efficient ordering mechanism. Your goal is to stay out of their way!

Don't be fooled by their linear method though; the right suggestive selling tactics are effective. Functional recommendations, such as well-matched cross-sells on the product page, or last minute essentials presented in the basket, actually help this shopper. Product specific marketing offers, such as rebates or site-wide free shipping are also very effective, particularly when access to details doesn't require clicks to new pages and applying them to the order is straightforward.



Circuit City charges up sales with great merchandising

- ✓ Guided navigation tools support the directed shopper and the curious browser
- ✓ Merchandising + marketing suggestions are obvious and relevant without interfering with focused
- ✓ Rich content helps all shoppers learn more

You can also support directed shoppers with guided selling tools that give them the ability to customize their categories with relevant sub-classifications based on features, price or materials.

Capturing the “browser”. You have even more opportunities to connect with your natural browsers. In addition to their responsiveness to the same merchandising techniques that appeal to surgical shopper, these users will step outside the typical linear path to explore more links, leverage experience-oriented features, and investigate advertising and promotional offers. They are often consciously looking for suggestions. Your goal is to keep them stimulated and entertained, but focused.

You can connect with browsers by organizing your items in fresh and unique ways. In addition to your functional product categories, construct alternative groups of your products and build emotionally driven, suggestive shopping categories. Proven winners include “New Arrivals”, a great category for your best customers who visit your site often, “Top Sellers” which takes anxiety out of decision-making, and “Shop by Theme”, “Shop by Style”, “Shop by Activity” and “Shop by Fit” categories, which group products around suggestive and or use-based characteristics rather than by strict type classifications. Seasonal categories are also popular, and depending on what you sell, grouping items by the problems

they solve is a big hit. For example, appliance and furniture sites might have a “Small Spaces” category. Even categories that speak to the knowledge and experience level of your customer can be effective, such as “For the Beginner” or “Performance Series”.

Don’t forget that these categories are incremental to your baseline functional categories. For most sites the purely functional classifications still represent popular pathways into products and as such are core to an effective shopping experience for many.

Merchandise throughout the site

Users can enter your website almost anywhere, unlike even the largest physical department store where paths are limited, confined by aisles, escalators, walls and racks. It takes time to move from one section to another and that time gives rise to a number of selling opportunities: signage, sales person intervention, and exposure to more products and categories.

Online, your visitor can move spontaneously, jumping from your HDTV fact sheet to your game systems pages in an instant. Accordingly, wrapping entries, exits and click paths in proven merchandising and marketing techniques is the ultimate road to engagement, satisfaction, referrals and sales.

Almost all types of pages, with the exception of checkout, where you want your users focused like a laser beam on finalizing their order, will benefit from strategically placed links, banners and other sales triggers.

Link to your assortment high and early. Online it's hard for customers to grasp the extent and nature of your offer. Even well known brands grapple with the challenge of building category specific awareness. At a minimum, make sure your high-level product categories persist globally. Limit the number of clicks to subcategories and consider adding drop down menus to the primary categories. Consider using key merchandising space on the home page to rotate through product category highlights.

Make sure essential offers appear on all relevant pages. Special promotions, discounts, rebate offers, upgrades, etc. need repeating because there is no guarantee your visitor will have seen them. Don't assume your user traversed your home or category pages and knows about the offer or the particulars of redemption.

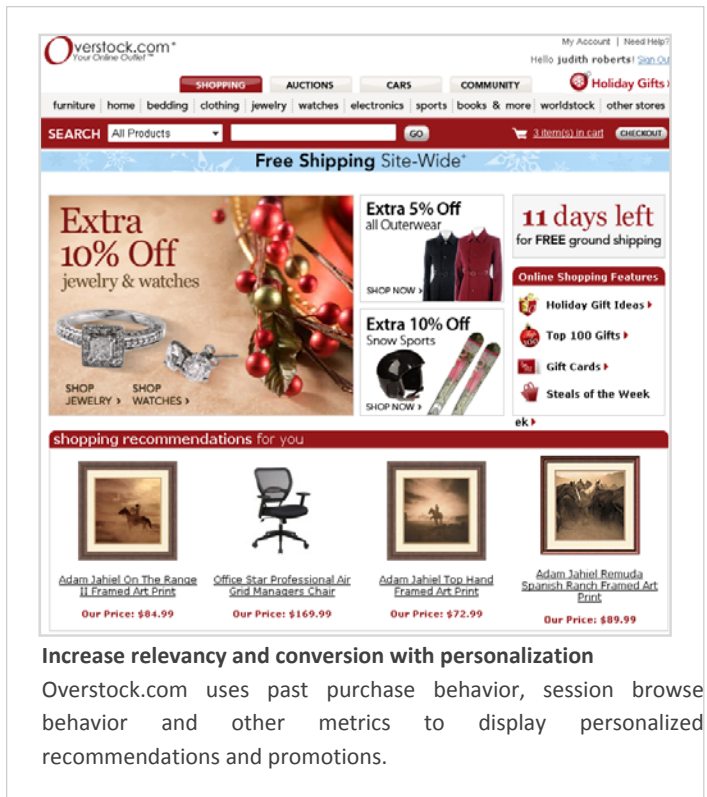
Personalize your presentation. Leverage previous purchases, browse behavior and visit source info to drive the right offers. Website personalization vendor Kefta claims their Dynamic Targeting solution typically delivers 20-30% site-wide improvement to conversion and revenue, and states that their clients have experienced as high as a 15X ROI. So, if they've browsed acoustic guitars, showcase acoustic guitars, stand-out product features and highly relevant marketing offers. Good navigation will allow them to go elsewhere if they need to, but since relevancy rules the web; you are likely to drive them deeper into the site and closer to purchases.

Present accessories, cross and upsells at the right places. Don't make your customer work to find the things that go well together. Headsets sell with MP3 players and cases sell with guitars. In spite of the fact that retailers drive increased average order values by helping customers accessorize their purchases, when Forrester Research evaluated manufacturer sites they found that only one-third of the sites evaluated integrated cross-sells and upsells



Motivate browsers with suggestive categories and solutions

Define where your users' goals meet your assortment, and, like **Baby Center**, you're assured of a home run. Know the purchase triggers and build your shopping categories, links and merchandising stories around them.



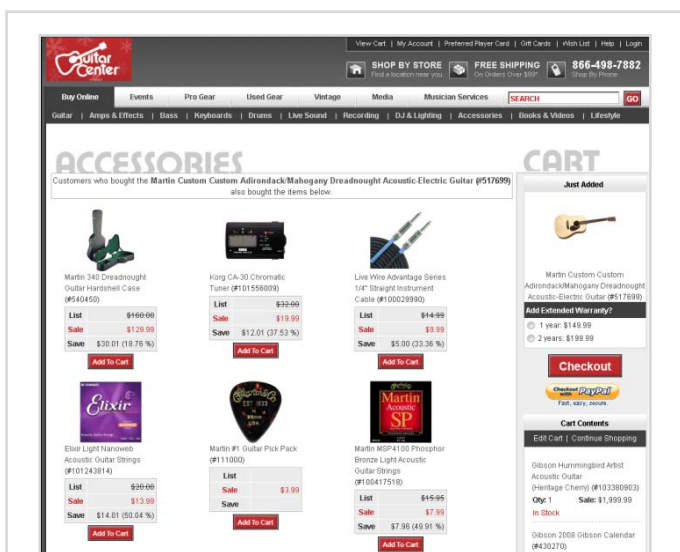
Increase relevancy and conversion with personalization

Overstock.com uses past purchase behavior, session browse behavior and other metrics to display personalized recommendations and promotions.

directly on the product page. While others included accessories in a separate section on the website, the majority had no accessory presence or merchandising at all. A separate section is helpful, particularly for post-purchase add-on sales, but should never preclude the right match-up at the right time. Present them on product pages and make it easy to buy all the items at once. Last minute essentials such as cables, batteries and care kits are great cart upsells.

of the page that describes section contents in an interesting and informative way. This is important for brand reinforcement as well.

Make suggestions with strong site merchandising banners and links throughout the site. Like most advertising messages, these kickers can do everything: introduce users to the depth and breadth of what you sell, keep specific products such as loss leaders and best sellers in front of customers, and take advantage of the subconscious tendency to click on strategically placed links and images.



Guitar Center sings with great upsell approach

Guitar Center presents highly relevant accessories on an interstitial page served when an item is added to the basket. The cart notice suggests the warranty, and the move to checkout is smooth and natural.

Showcase your assortment in multiple ways

Gone are the days when pages and pages of thumbnail images comprised the bulk of a shopping site. While those pages are absolutely essential and remain at a shopping site’s core, technology and bandwidth improvements allow us to be much more creative in the ways we spotlight our items. Already we are seeing the impact of exciting Rich Internet Application technologies (RIAs) that free us from traditional “page based” product presentations. When

Examine your site for “dead-end” pages. Dead ends are those pages where the user has nothing to do but click on global navigation or a “back to home” link. These are often your sign-up pages, thank pages, and search “no results” pages. Populate these pages with helpful links to best sellers, top categories, advertising messages, etc.

Anchor product listing and product detail pages. The most common entry into the site is no longer the home page. Fed by search engine marketing, affiliates, distribution partners and all manner of advertising activities, users land on a query or link relevant page, usually a product-listing page. Anchor the user by placing a small banner on the top



Anchor your product listing pages with relevant banners

This is helpful to all users as they navigate, and provides an opportunity to showcase categories and present applicable promotions.

you truly understand your products and why users want them, you are perfectly poised to merge design, form and function and create genuine, user-centric experiences. The following techniques range from simple to complex and are all proven ways to keep users engaged and buying.

Boutiques, or “stores within your store”, are a great way to showcase related items in a different context, such as specific brands collections.

Collection pages demonstrate how items look or work together.

Recently viewed links and thumbnails remind users of the products they browsed and remove important product access obstacles.

Good-better-best presentations help users discriminate between items and move the consumer into purchase mode, by shifting their mindset from “do I need this” to “which one of these best meets my needs.”



A “store-within-a-store” or microsite can showcase items

In addition to the “Shop by Brands” category Nordstrom created a fun environment browsing designer collections. JC Penney has a robust holiday microsite with a rich, festive, gift-giving focus.

“... WHEN YOU TRULY UNDERSTAND YOUR PRODUCTS, WHY CONSUMERS WANT THEM, AND HOW THEY ACTUALLY USE THEM, YOU ARE PERFECTLY POISED TO MERGE DESIGN, FORM AND FUNCTION TO CREATE GENUINE, USER-CENTRIC EXPERIENCES...”

Tell the whole product story

Make sure to include all relevant product information. As long as it’s clear, scanable and readable (break into small pieces, leverage bullet points, tabs, good contrast, etc.), providing more rather than less product information should be your mantra.

Use clear but persuasive language. Strike a solid balance between sharing facts and advertising. Both are very important.

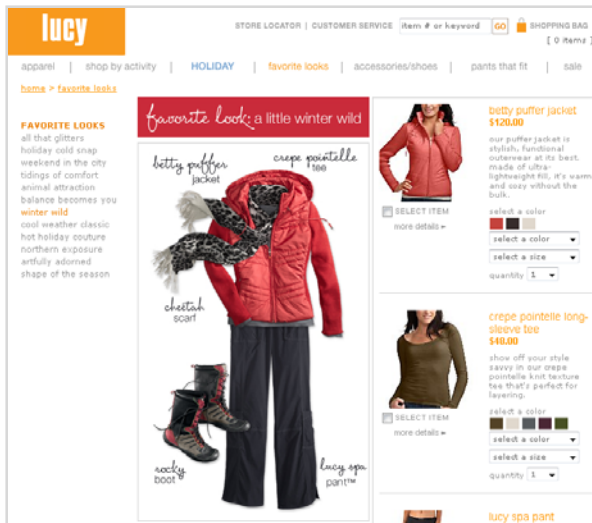
Answer common product questions. Interview buyers, product designers and customer service teams for insight into fit, installation, care, etc., and make this available as

core content as well as in call-outs, highlights and FAQs.

Stress product benefits and the problems products solve. This sets them apart and personalizes them. Your user actually begins to envision using or wearing the item.

Put content in context. For example, place links to size charts next to size selection boxes.

Include customer reviews and leverage testimonials. Access to peer-to-peer reviews and comments have revolutionized the way customers make buying decisions -- according to BazaarVoice, 48% of online shoppers seek reviews before purchasing, and 42% of first-time buyers cited customer reviews as the primary factor influencing the purchase.



Showcase items in collections

Collection selling is a great way to get your user more engaged with your assortment...and to buy more at a time.

Don't bury useful information. If items come in multiple colors, show it on the product listing page -- this is a great product attribute that will drive incremental item clicks. If dimensions are crucial to the buy decision, place them high on the detail page.



The Wine Enthusiast delivers on product detail pages

Scannable, readable, clickable. Great core product facts. Strong benefits + solutions statements. Easy access to product specialists. Viral + bookmarking tools. This page wins on all levels.

Begin with a marketing friendly site footprint

Make your site do some of the heavy lifting. Constantly strive to make your site work hard for you. Be adamant about the fact that it's more than an ordering mechanism. Walk through this checklist and ask yourself how your site is doing.

- ✓ **Are there clear and visible calls to action?** Think buttons, links and highlights such as "Buy Now", "Order Now", "Click Here" and "Learn More Now". And, although tests show that the use of red should be limited to error and "alert" messages, there is one key exception. Red Add to Cart buttons consistently outperform all other colors, even other bright colors.
- ✓ **Does your design include room for promotions and marketing messages?**
- ✓ **Does the site promote email sign-up?** If, on average, 3-5 of every 100 visits results in a purchase, then leveraging visits so you can continue to communicate is a worthy secondary goal.
- ✓ **Does your site include relevant viral, social-networking & user generated content tools?** Customer reviews, blogs, widgets and other new techniques are providing fresh opportunities and set leading companies apart.
- ✓ **Does your site integrate off-site marketing?** Good examples include landing customers on **relevant** pages, reinforcing email, search and online advertising messages and making it easy for customers to find and identify offline promotions.
- ✓ **Is your interface search engine friendly?** For a head start, look for the following: "spider-friendly" URLs; well-crafted title tags, meta description and keyword tags, image alt tags; rich, visible content (Caution! Don't fall into a common SEO trap! Make sure that your efforts to construct search engine friendly content throughout each page do not create an unfriendly and ineffective user experience); quality text and internal links; HTML and ideally XML Site maps

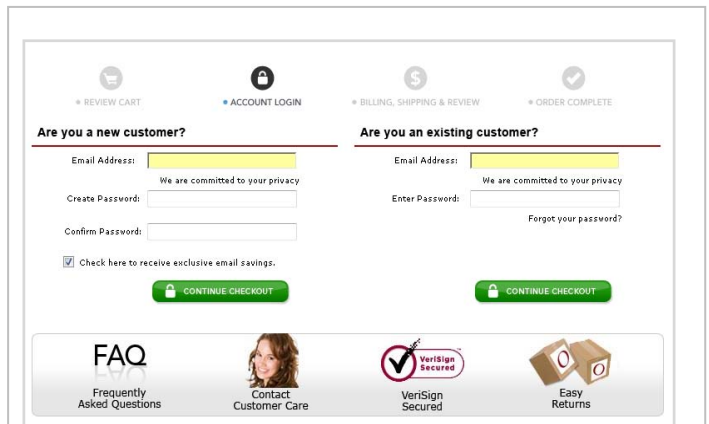
OPPORTUNITY #5

REMOVE REGISTRATION + CHECKOUT BARRIERS

Be relentless in your efforts to create simple, efficient task flows. Efficient task flows are a design essential, and nowhere is the impact of a poorly designed process greater than in checkout. Use this seven-point checklist as your checkout guide.

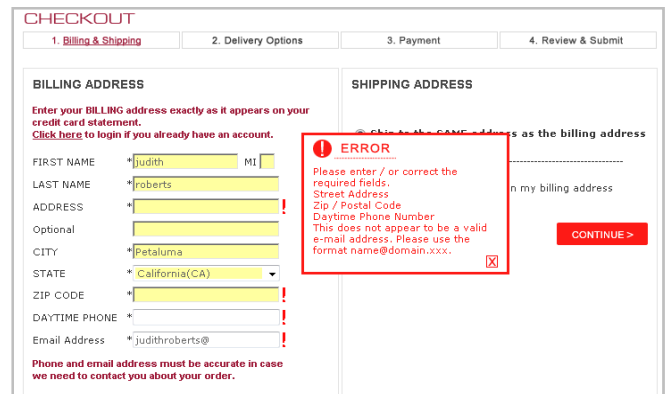
- ✓ *Present steps in a logical and focused order.* For example, don't require users to create accounts in order to initiate or complete their order. Present benefits and ask at the end.
- ✓ *Provide a progress bar* In checkout or other step based processes. This helps users know exactly where they are in the process and how much time they will be investing to finalize.
- ✓ *Pre-populate forms whenever possible.* In the event user errors need to step backward, don't make them re-enter all information. Credit card details may be an exception, but name, address and other information should generally be retained.
- ✓ *Keep users inside the checkout process.* Include context help, privacy and security links, but when serving requested information, layer it in the existing page rather than taking the user out of the checkout process. New technologies such as AJAX and other Rich Internet Applications (RIAs) are a great asset here.
- ✓ *Present error messages next to the error,* and highlight with a visible error graphic and red text. This is also great way to leverage some of the powerful new technologies such as AJAX.
- ✓ *Use a friendly and efficient tone* when communicating errors. Don't sound accusatory or demeaning. Sadly, it happens, and frequently!
- ✓ *Present estimated order totals early.* Estimate totals including shipping, tax and discounts in the shopping cart, and carry totals forward to each subsequent page. One of the highest reasons for abandons is sticker shock.

- ✓ *Remember basic online design guidelines.* Online retailers often put extra effort into designing perfect home, category, product listing and product detail pages, forgetting checkout, where the site becomes hard to read, lacks useful content and links, and is awkward to execute. Experience based design crosses most of your opportunities, recognize its importance and make it a core, guiding principle.



Keep users moving through an efficient checkout process

Checkout is the last place you want to have users stopping to figure out what they need to do or because they become concerned about finalizing their order.



Help users easily + quickly recover from errors

No wondering what went wrong here! User recovery will be quick and they are back on the road to completion instead of frustration. In addition to the error explanation box beside the actual error, note the exclamation points at each field input error.

CONCLUSION

As every eCommerce team knows, the Internet is empowering consumers around the world, changing the way they discover, evaluate and buy everything from soap to wine cellars. Your website is a monumental opportunity for you to invigorate your brand and amplify sales from all channels. As you assess your website and plan its evolution, remember these key principles:

Build perspective before driving changes: understand your customer, your competition and your online mission.

Work from an assessment framework: remove ambiguity, bias and subjectivity by clinically evaluating your site against a set of pre-defined criteria and from the

perspective of your users.

Look for well-known design flaws and proven solutions: with very few exceptions, only reinvent solutions when absolutely necessary and when there is an obvious, strategic reason to move you away from proven best practices.

Lastly, make the process of review and change part of an ongoing process and long-term site management strategy. It takes dedication and commitment but the payoffs are worth the investment. Start today and realize your eCommerce potential.

About the Author

Judith Roberts is President of *estategyfirst*, a boutique agency specializing in online marketing, merchandising and channel integration. The firm's consulting mission is to deliver actionable, fact-based strategies and concrete tactics on each client assignment, producing measurable, sustainable results. *estategyfirst* offers a comprehensive suite of both strategic advisory and tactical services serving catalogers, retailers and specialty brand manufacturers.

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