

DesignConcept E-Commerce Primer

If you are a reasonably intelligent adult, well read and current with world events, you might still find yourself left in the dust when it comes to Internet e-commerce. That is partly due to the fact that e-commerce has its own arcane vocabulary that outsiders find impenetrable, and partly because it's a reasonably simple business model hidden behind very complex layers of technical alchemy.

Using the Frequently Asked Question format (what could be more appropriate for the Internet), the following is a basic primer on Internet e-commerce. If you are contemplating taking the plunge or just trying to make sense out of it all, this FAQ will at least help you understand what the designer or code writer is talking about and what it will take to put together an e-commerce website.

What Is E-commerce?

The obvious answer is "selling something over the Internet," but it can be a bit more complicated. Should using your website to sell new age cassettes with a toll free 800 number be considered e-commerce? Kind of, but not really. Most of us think of e-commerce as a website that actually has a transactional capability built into the site. You can view the cassette tape titles, read short descriptions of what is on the tape, and click a button to add the tape to your shopping cart. When you have completed your shopping, you can proceed to the check-out and pay for the merchandise in your cart with a credit card. An encrypted process safeguards your credit card information and the authorization is done while you are still online. You then receive a confirming e-mail that indicates whether the item is in or out of stock, and when it will be shipped.

Who Needs an E-commerce Website?

If you want to provide basic information about your services or products (e.g. lawyers, CPAs, public relations consultants, etc.), you probably do not need an e-commerce website. A basic storefront website, such as those offered by VeriSign (www.imagecafe.com), can be an inexpensive but useful

way to let your clients and customers know that you are on the Internet. In many respects, it is a litmus test that proves you are at least aware of the medium and can receive e-mail. If, on the other hand, you have a specific product or service that can be shown in a picture or adequately described (e.g. books, software, furniture, art glass, etc.), an e-commerce site could be an ideal way to reach and sell to a larger audience.

Can I Build My Own E-commerce Site?

This is a little bit like asking if you can build your own airplane. The answer is, yes, if you can build your own airplane, you probably have the engineering skill and patience to build your own e-commerce website. But if you have other things you would like or need to do over the next year or two, you might want to find a website designer to create your e-commerce website for you.

Who Establishes Your Domain Name?

Every website has to have an address and that means someone has to come up with a domain name, see if it's available and apply for it. If you've already come up with a name, you're halfway there. Some design firms (including our own) also can help you create a name for a first-time product or service. First-time registration is about \$120 and unless you've been under a rock, you should know that there is a bustling business in buying up domain names in hopes that they will appreciate in value. There are still plenty of ways to get a name that works for you, but don't be surprised if it takes three or four tries to find something that no one else has taken.

How Do You Find A Website Designer/Programmer?

Just about anyone can hang out a shingle as a website designer. Trust us, just about everyone has. Some of them are still in school, some have been involved with computing as a hobby or a vocation, and some have had extensive training and experience. Caveat emptor. Some website designers can build a basic website but do not have the skill to build an e-commerce site. Some website builders are talented code warriors (programmers), but can not create a decent graphic to save their lives. The ideal combination is a someone who has both the design and programming skills to help you create an attractive site that is also very functional. They might be small two and three person studios or large agencies that include hosting services (more on that later). You can usually find them in the

phonebook under graphic designers, web design, or computer services.

One way to find a website designer is to surf some sites that were created for local companies and see if there are sites that you really like. Often, the designer or hosting company will have a credit link at the bottom of the opening page and you can visit their site to find out more about their services and costs. Also, ask around the way you would to find a good car mechanic. Call different companies and ask them who built their website and whether they would use them again. You may get a real earful but you may find a gem. You could also learn enough to avoid someone else's nightmare.

What Am I Looking for in a Website Designer/Builder?

The answer is actually two more questions. Can you talk to them? Do they listen to you? If you tell them you want X and they come back with Y, it may not be a very good working relationship. We have met graphic designers/coders who are talented at their graphics and coding and absolutely the pits as business people. They don't return calls, they miss deadlines, they submit sloppy proposals or invoices. Remember that just because someone has graphics or coding experience, they do not necessarily have good business or communication skills. Look for a good fit on a personal and business level and then look at their work. Ask for references, especially for the sites they are featuring at their own website. You may end up working with these people for five or six months, or more. Make sure you have a good feeling about them from the start.

One more hint: big companies tend to gravitate toward bigger agencies to handle their website design and construction, while small to medium size companies feel more comfortable with smaller groups. The big company wants everyone to jump when the holler, and the smaller company figures their business will mean more to a smaller website builder. They are both right, but we have seen it work the other way as well, so don't rule a group out because they are too big or too small -- look at their work. Ultimately, the thing you will want the most from your designer is trust, as in you can trust them to be there for you and to finish the work in a professional manner.

What's the Difference Between Front-End Website Design and Back-End Coding?

Very often, as is the case with DesignConcept, websites are designed by people who are highly skilled at the communications and graphics part of the equation. We know how to use graphics to communicate and how to

organize information so that it is useful and easy to follow. We have also learned to use a variety of software products that will help us build the individual pages of a website. This part of the process is often referred to as front-end website design, for the obvious reasons. In our case, we have an alliance with highly experienced and talented programmers to help us with more complex site requirements, such as e-commerce solutions, and this segment of the work is called back-end coding. It's in the back, where you can't see it, so the name makes sense. It also refers to the requirements of the server where the files for your website reside, and how that server is the power behind the entire website.

What's an ISP?

All websites need a host -- an organization you pay a monthly fee to be the keepers of your website files. They usually are referred to as an Internet Service Provider (ISP) and they can provide many services to you in addition to hosting your website. Some are local, some are national (www.mindspring.com, www.md1.net, etc), but they all make it possible for browsers anywhere in the world to find your website. They may also offer design services and basic e-commerce set-ups. Your designer can recommend a good ISP or your back-end coders may have this capability or an existing relationship with an ISP that they would like you to use. Just keep in mind that e-commerce sites place heavier demands on an ISP in terms of bandwidth (number of hits), so you want an ISP that you know is reliable. Ask for references of other e-commerce sites they currently host to make sure they can handle your needs.

How Do You Process Credit Cards on the Internet?

You need a merchant ID number in order to process credit card transactions. You get a merchant number from your bank, and in our experience, it pays to decide upon your payment authorization facilitator (see next question) first, as they may be able to recommend banks that will be most amenable to helping you set up your merchant account. Some banks seem to be a bit fuzzy on how to help you set this up for the Internet, and other banks are very current.

Who Facilitates the Credit Card Payment Authorization?

Unless your company is the size of amazon.com, you will most likely need to establish a relationship with an Internet payment authorization facilitator. Their function is to help you process the credit card transaction, to make the authorization, to facilitate the transfer of the credit to your bank, to e-mail the order to you, and to e-mail a confirmation of the order to your customer. All of

this is done with a maximum amount of security and encryption to protect you and your customer. Since many back-end coding specialists may be able to provide this service, or already have relationships with certain credit card facilitators, you should get their input before you make a final decision.

What's the Timeline to Design, Build and Launch an E-commerce Website?

Our estimate would be anywhere from four to ten months, depending on how big a site and how big your design and code team is. Do not underestimate the amount of planning that it takes -- from selecting your final catalog of items to generating a unique stock number for each item, there's a lot of detail work to e-commerce. As it is with home construction or renovation, figure out a timeline and then add another 20 per cent for overage, because you can just about guarantee that everything will take longer than you calculated.

What Are Integrated Databases?

If your e-commerce site has a substantial amount of data that is constantly changing, it might well be worth the additional front-end expense of creating an integrated database. In simple terms, this a basic database of information that the owner of the site (or other non-programmers) can update daily, weekly, or monthly without knowing any specialized programming skills. Once this database is integrated into your website, you have more direct control over the content without having to call a programmer for every single update. An integrated database is a two-way street in that it also allows you to collect more data, such as the names of your repeat customers. This in turn would allow you to incorporate a feature such as password entry, enabling your repeat customer to not only be greeted by name but also this customer would not need to reenter all their shipping and credit card information each time they make a purchase. It also enables other functionalities, such as a search engine.

How Do You Test the Site?

Over and over. Just about the worst thing that you can do with any website is put it out there without knowing if it really works. With e-commerce, this becomes even more important, since an unhappy customer is never coming back. Most payment facilitators have various means to test the site prior to launch. We also suggest that you have some friends make purchases in the early days to test the e-mail confirmations and shipping efficiency. In general, it is much better to ramp up the traffic slowly rather than at full speed from day one.

How Do You Promote Your Site and Create Traffic?

Information imbedded in the HTML code for each page, known as META tags, help search engines find your site based on the keywords you provide. You can also register the site with hundreds of search engines/directories or use services that do it for you. Competent back-end coders can recommend other ways to optimize your hit rate. You also need to be thinking about banner ads on other websites as a means of directing traffic to your site. Other strategies include broadcast e-mail and faxes, as well as conventional direct mailings to targeted mailing lists.

Are There Any Ways to Guarantee E-Commerce Success?

No, but that's the beauty of it. As a programmer friend likes to point out to us, we all have the same piece of real estate to work with and it's about 800 pixels wide by 600 pixels high. No one really has a better location than the next guy --- just a better idea. Without the constraints of the brick and mortar business model, the e-commerce entrepreneur is free to fly or may crash to the ground. Learn all you can and study the successful businesses for clues to what works. Good hunting.