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QUICK GUIDE TO E-COMMERCE

8 ideas to improve your shopping cart process

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Quick Guide to E-commerce

E-commerce: 8 ideas to improve your shopping cart process

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TACTICS YOU CAN LEARN OVER LUNCH

Welcome to *Quick Guide to E-commerce* – a resource from MarketingSherpa featuring bite-sized tips for busy marketers.

In this report, we provide ideas to improve the shopping cart and checkout process for your customers (and potential customers).

The shopping cart is an area where many marketers drop the ball. Some may make the mistake of assuming that once they've driven visitors to the checkout area, the mission is accomplished and things will flow automatically from there.

In reality, it is just the opposite. This is a point in the process involving considerable stress and anxiety for the visitor, so it's critical that you do everything you can to alleviate their concerns and make this process as comfortable and simple as possible.

In this report, we'll show you:

- How to help visitors maintain their momentum
- Tips for simplifying the cart
- Ways to put customers at ease
- Why you need to be prepared for abandoned carts

We're eager to share these tips on how you can ensure that your shopping cart encourages visitors to complete their transaction instead of changing their minds.

We know you're in a hurry, so let's begin.

Bobbi Dempsey
Editor, *Quick Guide to E-commerce*

About *Quick Guide to E-commerce*

MarketingSherpa's *Quick Guide to E-commerce* is designed with you, the busy marketer, in mind. We provide quick, simple tips you can use right away.

For each Quick Guide, we scour the vast MECLABS library of marketing research, from MarketingSherpa case studies and Benchmark Reports to MarketingExperiments optimization tests and analyses. We highlight tips to help improve your marketing performance right now – or at least by the time you're done with lunch.

Tactic #1. Consider the basics

While there are many tweaks and adjustments you can make to your shopping cart – including adding all sorts of bells and whistles – you really just need to focus on a few simple, yet important, steps that can make a big difference in how visitors feel about your shopping cart.

These are identified in the MarketingExperiments Blog post, "E-commerce: 6 quick cart changes."

We will discuss most of these issues in more detail in some of the tactics later in this guide. But, here are the basic steps you can take to make your shopping cart more user-friendly:

1. Remove unnecessary steps: Keep it short and simple.
2. Eliminate competing options: Let visitors focus on one main action.
3. Demonstrate a clear sequence: A progress indicator or simple arrow can all help the user know where they are and where they need to go.
4. Express value in every step: Keep reminding visitors of your value proposition, and why they don't want to miss out on the purchase opportunity.
5. Justify every action: Visitors should be convinced there's a reason for each step you make them take.
6. Intensify anxiety reduction: You want to make the visitor comfortable and avoid or address any concerns they may have.

Tactic #2. Keep it as short as possible

What's the perfect length for a shopping cart? You probably won't be surprised to find that it depends. The amount of space you need will rely on a number of factors, including the type of products involved, as noted in the MarketingExperiments Blog post, "E-commerce: How long should a shopping cart be?"

A short cart is generally preferable, but if you need a longer format, making the cart more user-friendly by breaking the process up into a few easy steps may be a smart approach. As a bonus, this also makes it easier for you as the marketer to pinpoint the leaks in the process.

Ideally, with repeat customers, you can shorten the process since you already have some of their information on file. There are also likely steps you can skip in this situation, since the repeat customer is already familiar with your process and trusts your site.

While expert opinions may vary on the particulars, there are two things everyone seems to agree on: you should only ask for the information you absolutely need, and you should make the process as intuitive, pain-free and user-friendly as possible.

If you do have a multistep process, you should have clear indicators that show the shopper where they are in the process.

Tactic #3. Give new users a positive first impression

You want to make the checkout process as comfortable as possible for all users, but it's especially important that you make new users feel at ease. If they are annoyed by the process, not only are they less likely to complete the transaction, but they also may be hesitant to return to your site again.

Unless there is some unusually compelling aspect attracting them to your site, new users are a category of visitors with low motivation. They're looking for a low-hassle experience, and if they don't find it, they probably won't think twice about leaving.

In the MarketingSherpa Blog post, "E-commerce: Why a forced checkout registration is never a good idea," John Nye, Research Analyst, MECLABS, noted one of the most certain ways to drive away new visitors is to make them commit to creating an account before they even make a purchase on your site.

Subjecting these less-motivated users to a long registration and checkout process will increase the odds of cart abandonment.

If you absolutely cannot avoid requiring a registration, you should strive to make the process quick and painless.

Here are two suggested options – you can test to see which works best for you.

Method #1. Front-end option

Provide an optional account registration option at the beginning of the checkout process for users with high motivation or brand loyalty.

However, you may need to provide some incentives to convince that user the registration option is in their best interest.

Method #2. Back-end option

Most businesses still need to ask customers to fill out billing and shipping information during the checkout process. Why not offer customers an opt-in to a registration after their information has been submitted? This only requires one action from the visitor (a "yes" or "no" answer) and can be placed before or after the completion of the order.

You may also need to include some additional value copy to convince users that a registration option is in their best interest, but the beauty here is that you're not making them jump through the same hoop twice.

No matter which option you pick, the goal is to test your sales funnel to discover the most strategic place for a required account registration if you can't avoid it.

Tactic #4. Eliminate factors that cause abandonment

Many shoppers go missing in action after starting the checkout process, so keeping these potential buyers from going astray should be a major concern for e-commerce marketers. In the MarketingExperiments Blog post, "Shopping Cart Abandonment: 7 simple steps to completing the sale," Lauren Maki, Optimization Manager, MECLABS, cited a Forrester Research study that found 88% of consumers have abandoned an online shopping cart without completing their transaction.

Here are some simple steps that can help reduce your abandonment rates.

Be upfront about shipping costs and information

The previously referenced Forrester study found the number one reason people do not complete their transactions is because "shipping and handling costs were too high." Consumers also became annoyed when shipping costs were addressed too late in the process.

Not only is it important to be clear and upfront with your customers about how much shipping will *cost* them, but also *how long* they should expect shipping to take.

Fanatics.com, a sports apparel website, does this very effectively. It has a persistent bar throughout the site highlighting the cheap and quick shipping, as well as its user-friendly return policy.

Put your customers at ease

Anxiety is inherently part of the Internet; it is especially high when a user makes an online purchase. During the checkout process, it is usually related to information and payment security. According to an [Econsultancy survey](#), 58% of users said "concerns about payment security" would deter them from completing their purchase. To correct for this, place third-party security logos near the credit card fields.

Don't require new users to register

Forrester Research reported 23% of customers would exit the purchase process when prompted to register with the site. Why? Because Internet users suffer from account and password creation fatigue. Bottom line? They just don't want to do it.

Allow new registrants to go through a guest checkout and complete their purchase unannoyed. After you have received their payment, offer to create an account for them using the information they have already filled out. This way, it is presented as if you are doing them a favor.

Make it quick and easy

Research shows that the amount of time it takes to complete a form is negatively correlated to conversion rate. The less time it takes, the higher the conversion rate will be, and vice versa.

Here are some simple ways to reduce friction:

- Keep the number of fields to a minimum; only ask for what you really need. This means removing the phone number field unless absolutely necessary. This field is one of the biggest form conversion rate killers.
- Use the "Same as billing address" checkbox for the shipping address.
- Use a clean, simple layout with left-aligned and clearly labeled fields.
- Use a progress bar to visually indicate where the customer is in the process.
- Explain confusing or difficult fields with a tool tip.

Use persistent carts

The second reason for abandonment found in the Forrester study was, "I was not ready to purchase the product." While you have little to no control of *when* a user will be ready to purchase, you can tailor your site to make these users' shopping experiences seamless when they *are* ready. Do this by saving their carts and allowing them to return at a later time to purchase.

Use cart retrieval emails

Research shows triggered retrieval emails can significantly increase your conversion rate. There are many different theories around timing of email messaging, but it is widely agreed upon (and has been tested) that sending a retrieval email immediately is imperative. The longer you wait, the more you lose.

To learn more about what and when to send, check out this MarketingSherpa Blog post, "Email Marketing: Reclaim abandoned shopping carts with triggered 'remarketing' emails."

Tactic #5. Consider four factors that interrupt momentum

In the MarketingExperiments Web clinic, "Reducing Cart Abandonment," Flint McGlaughlin, Managing Director, MECLABS, stressed that the shopping cart is one of the greatest opportunities to impact the Profit and Loss. Yet, many marketers don't spend nearly enough time thinking about ways to optimize their shopping cart.

"The cart is in the mature part of the funnel, as you move through further in the process," McGlaughlin noted. "And yet, most of us spend all of our energies improving the landing part or other elements at the wider part of the funnel."

As a result, marketers may be overlooking a valuable opportunity to improve completion rates, which translates to lost revenue.

McGlaughlin summed it up: "Optimizing the cart and the checkout process can drive significant yield."

Encourage the continued momentum

The objective of the shopping cart is to maintain as much forward momentum as possible from the product page all the way through the purchase process right to the thank you page. Cart abandonment happens when something disrupts that momentum, usually by distracting or annoying the customer.

The good news is making small tweaks, or what appear to be minor changes, can make a big difference. Things that may not look like a huge change on the page can be a significant change in the mind of the customer.

Let's look at four obstacles that can interrupt the momentum – and easy ways to avoid them.

Obstacle #1. Unwarranted confusion

As with many steps of the process, when visitors arrive at your shopping cart, they want to know where they are and what they can do there. We estimate that a marketer has approximately seven seconds to answer these questions at each step of the shopping cart process.

Your cart should be laid out in a way that makes it clear how the customer should proceed. Laying out the steps in a clear line – perhaps even labeled by a step indicator – helps make it obvious exactly what they should do.

Obstacle #2. Unexpressed value (value isn't emphasized)

Just because the customer has put something in their cart and clicked the "purchase" button, it doesn't mean you no longer need to stress the value. If anything, emphasizing the value is even more important here than at any other point because you must overcome the fact that the customer will be considering the cost, both mental and material, of this interaction at this point.

You want to emphasize the value of the offer and any savings. Make sure the call-to-action is clear and implies value. Credibility indicators and satisfaction guarantees are also helpful elements here.

Obstacle #3. Unaddressed anxiety

Anxiety is at its all-time highest at the shopping cart part of the transaction process. Think about ways in which you can reduce potential anxiety. Some examples might be to add customer testimonials or a live chat box to immediately answer any questions. Again, credibility indicators are also helpful.

Obstacle #4. Undirected choices

If the checkout process is too cluttered and confusing, your customers won't know what they are supposed to do and will feel overwhelmed. This slows down that important forward momentum, and may even bring them to a complete stop. Don't give them too many choices or throw lots of information at them. Keep it simple and guide them to the primary choice – the main action you want them to take.

Tactic #6. Don't try to include too many features in the checkout process

In the MarketingExperiments Blog post, "[Shopping Cart Abandonment: How not being annoying can get you 67% more cart completions](#)," Austin McCraw, Senior Editorial Analyst, MECLABS, said most shoppers hate when brick-and-mortar stores make them jump through hoops and answer a lot of questions before they can complete a purchase at the register. It's the same thing with an online purchase. The customer is usually in a hurry, and doesn't want to feel like they're enduring an endless obstacle course just to buy something.

"Most shopping carts that companies use are bulky and have more features than needed (i.e., cart registration, order confirmations, cross-promotional offerings, etc.)," McCraw noted. "Sometimes this means a shopping cart looks less like a basic transaction facilitator, and more like a boot camp obstacle training course with high walls and flaming hoops."

McCraw cited an example of a test involving a MECLABS Research Partner, which the checkout process consisted of eight separate steps including a user account creation process that spanned three pages. Once the MECLABS research team reorganized and simplified the process – cutting it down to one single basic step – order completions increased by more than 68%.

While some of the steps in an overly cluttered checkout process may help you gather some valuable information, all of the customer retention features and cross-promotional options involved there can be strategically accomplished after the initial sale has already been completed. For instance, you can ask for the customer to create an account for future purchases or send them to a thank you page that has cross-promotional offers.

Tactic #7. Test new technologies and tactics before making assumptions

In the MarketingExperiments Web clinic, "Accordion-Style Checkouts Tested," Jon Powell, Senior Manager of Research and Strategy, MECLABS, analyzed the results of several checkout experiments designed to test the effectiveness of using an accordion-style checkout.

The accordion-style checkout is a design approach where the individual sections of the checkout process are expanded or hidden as needed so customers only need to focus on one area at a time. As the user progresses, they see only a summary of what they completed and the next immediate step. Many people would assume this design would be more appealing to users.

To see how the accordion-style checkout process affects the experience (and, as a result, the completion rates) the MECLABS team conducted a series of experiments. The initial findings, which probably surprised some people, showed that switching to an accordion-style cart either made no difference or actually had a negative impact on the cart completion rates.

Further tests revealed that making more subtle changes, such as removing dividing lines that visually chopped up the page into sections, and making other minor tweaks to the design and copy, were much more successful in improving completion rates.

Remember that the goal isn't to impress the user, it's to enable them. Fancy tools and cool designs may look nice, but the customer is more concerned with having a smooth experience and a simple purchase process.

Also, be selective about the technologies you test and changes you try. Changing your cart can be time-consuming and costly, and the process also results in some adjustments and possible inconvenience, such as site downtime, for visitors.

Tactic #8. Be prepared for those who drop out

No matter how well you optimize your shopping cart, you will always have a certain number of people who don't complete the process. This is unavoidable because there are some factors you just can't control – a shopper can have a number of reasons for walking away that may have nothing to do with your site or your product.

But just because they've stepped away from the checkout process doesn't necessarily mean you've lost them for good – at least, not if you're prepared with a plan to lure these wanderers back to your site.

You must have a strategy to deal with cart abandonment. This generally involves one or more carefully worded and executed emails, the first of which is usually sent as soon as possible after the customer has left the cart.

You can see a step-by-step example of the process (complete with samples) in the MarketingSherpa article, "Online Cart Abandonment: 12% lift in captured revenue through customer service-focused email remarketing campaign."

Of course, you don't have to limit your efforts strictly to people who leave during the checkout process. There are some tips for dealing with people who walk away during various steps along the way in the MarketingSherpa article, "E-commerce: Moving beyond shopping cart abandonment nets 65% more checkout conversions."

Useful Links and Resources

MarketingExperiments Blog: E-commerce: How your peers optimize shopping carts and product pages

MarketingExperiments Blog: E-commerce Testing: Redesigned order page, shortened shopping cart drive 13.9% lift in conversion

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