Selecting the Perfect eCommerce Software

by Chris Sivori, JSJ Productions, Inc.

For several business and website projects, I've had to locate good, third party eCommerce software in order to allow for online ordering and payment. For each project, the requirements have been different in terms of payment methods, accounting systems and even server configurations. This often means using different applications for each project. Here are some of the things you need to consider when shopping around.

Try to pick the right product for the right platform.
What server platform are you using? If you don't know, ask whoever runs your business website. Pick the eCommerce application that fits in with everything else you're doing and it will be a lot easier to integrate and maintain. If most of your site is running on a Windows 2003 Server using ASP.NET and MS SQL, go with an eCommerce application that uses ASP.NET. If, on the other hand, you're running on Linux with PHP/MySQL pick something that fits in with that. Most popular cart applications are written in either PHP or ASP, which are simply dynamic scripting languages for the web. This allows content to be generated and presented on the fly, a necessity when calculating order totals, listing order contents and outputting information pulled from databases.

Consider the software license.
Examine the software license agreement. What are you allowed to do? How many times can you install the application? What are the limitations? Many popular eCommerce solutions like osCommerce are open source, which means that not only is it free to download, but you can do whatever you like with it. Some products will allow you to install multiple times if you buy one license, others will only let you install and use once. Always check the license to see how you are permitted to use the product, and if you can try to take future plans into account, so you are not stuck having to buy additional licenses.
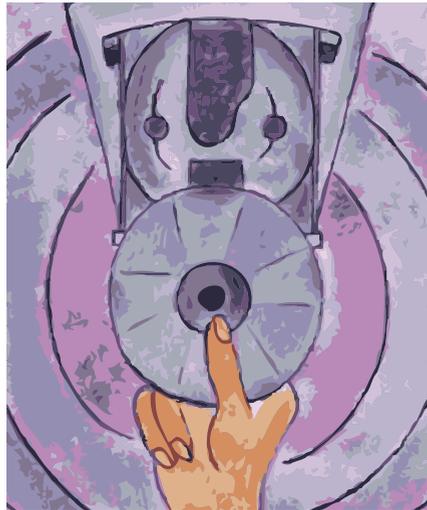
What payment types are supported?
How will you be accepting payment online? Paypal, credit cards, eGold, etc.? If you plan to take credit cards, you'll need some sort of online payment processing gateway usually provided by companies like Authorize.net. Most eCommerce applications support Authorize.net and Paypal, but you should make sure you know two things: how you will be accepting payment, and are your desired forms of payment supported by the eCommerce application.

Adapting the eCommerce software to the look and feel of your site.
How easy is it to template or re-skin the shopping cart application? Even if you're not a web designer or web developer you can view websites that use the eCommerce application. If they all look the same, it's probably not an easy product to modify.

This is a big deal unless you don't mind having a storefront that looks like everybody else. One of the things you'll notice about many of the eCommerce packages is that the end result always looks very similar. This is particularly true of many of the cheap and free alternatives like osCommerce or CubeCart, for example. Do some research on how easy it is to re-skin

or re-template the application output, especially if you want the storefront to be integrated into the look and feel of your website. When looking at different products, look for something that can output a product listing into your overall site design. Stay away from products that have too many modules and extras because this tends to get in the way of changing the way it looks. It always helps to visit sites that are using the product to see what's possible.

What support is available?
When considering a product, determine what kind of support comes with it. If it's a free product, don't expect any. Raise your expectation level as the price goes up. For any product, you'll need to read the documentation. Look for good documentation and an active community when working with a free product. For commercial products, do your research on what type of support is provided by the vendor. Many vendors will offer free installation or other services that will lower your costs. Other companies specialize in selling extra services that other vendors provide at no additional cost. For example, you may be charged for necessary payment modules that other companies would give away with the product. Support can be a big deal and an added headache if not planned for in advance.

One of the greatest things about the Internet is the access it gives to robust tools and services at a reasonable cost. Every small business has the opportunity to leverage affordable technology to build an eCommerce presence on the web.

In our next issue, I'll explain easy to use techniques for generating leads from your business website.

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