

# In web site design, technology and art come together

**W**hen PC Universe Inc. redesigned its web site last year, the company knew that just giving the home page a new treatment wasn't enough to energize sales or take market share from competitors. It wanted a site with better features and functions that would grab shoppers' attention and turn browsers into buyers. "Just redesigning how the site looked wasn't going to help us stand out," says PC Universe director of e-commerce Patrick Colletta. "Building better features and functions would increase our cross-selling capability."

To achieve that goal, PC Universe, retailer of computers and related gear, added intelligent shopping tools and reduced the steps to checkout by 50%. The result: PC Universe's average ticket has grown by 25% to more than \$400 while the sale of computer accessories has jumped by 22%. "The new design gets shoppers more quickly to product pages, but it's the advanced features that really boosted sales," says Colletta. "Our advanced features separate us from the competition."

As the entire online retailing industry becomes more competitive, adding faster and more sophisticated tools has become a top priority not just for PC Universe, but for many other web retailers. The main focus of web design used to be on using different fonts, elements and images to create a unique look for the home page as well as for category and product pages. Now

retailers are responding to consumers' greater sophistication about online shopping by making features and functions planning an integral component of the design process. Put a different way: Looks matter, but more retailers realize that better site performance and usability count for even more.

In the early days of web retailing, features and functions planning

was straightforward. At the same time designers were creating new page templates, webmasters and programmers were implementing better search, a faster shopping cart and some rich media. Today consumers still want fast site search and expedited checkout, but they also expect web retailers to provide them with advanced tools for comparison shopping such as customer reviews or product videos and more social networking features such as customer forums and wikis.

"Planning advanced features to incorporate into a new design should be as fundamental as creating the new look," says Johanna Murphy, senior director of user experience and design at GSI Commerce Inc., a third-party provider of e-commerce technology and web design services to about 80 large chain retailers and consumer brand manufacturers. "When a retailer is making over a web site, performance and usability should matter as much as a distinct design."

## Group effort

Today most established online retailers have about two dozen basic web site features or functions that visitors use to find merchandise and complete a purchase. But rather than make changes piecemeal, more retailers are implementing their new advanced features and functions as a group at the same time they are redesigning their sites.

For instance, in tandem with its newly recreated home and product pages, PC Universe, which generates annual web sales of more than \$13.5 million, launched an updated version of its e-commerce platform with several new features such as improved site navigation, expanded product information and one-click checkout for returning customers.

One new application in particular, a product recommendation program developed for PCUniverse.com by CNET Networks Inc. now automatically selects and places accessories such as the right printer and cables into the shopping cart as a customer completes the purchase of a new computer.

"We carry over 250,000 individual SKUs and shoppers shouldn't have to jump through hoops and perform two separate transactions just to buy the right combination of gear," Colletta says. "Our customers wanted quicker ways to assemble a computer package and we followed through."

### High expectations

During the start-up phase of business-to-consumer e-commerce, the chief design priority for many merchants was creating a web site that reinforced the company's brand. Retailers often devoted their time and resources to designing the home and product pages with elaborate images and snappy copy, but with limited functionality. Today consumers expect more than just static pages.

As broadband access has penetrated more than 60% of Internet homes, more merchants are designing web sites with highly interactive features. They're also designing their next-generation shopping applications to meet specific performance objectives.

Scholastic Inc., for example, developed detailed objectives for

most advanced features and functions prior to redesigning Scholastic.com. As an established source of content for teachers, parents and students, Scholastic.com is one of the most frequently visited education sites with more than 2.5 million unique visitors each month.

But Scholastic, which generates annual web sales of about \$370 million, needed to rework major sections of content and add features that made it easier for its more than 1 million registered teachers to download lesson plans and other materials. To increase revenue, Scholastic also wanted to build a subscription-based digital library that would give teachers access to more than 10,000 items such as student practice pages, awards, flash cards and learning games.

"We had to find better ways to marry content and commerce," says Seth Radwell, president of eScholastic, the company's e-commerce and Internet business unit. "Grade school teachers are our historical sweet spot; we had to redesign our site with the advanced features and functions they expect."

### Doing homework

Scholastic used focus groups, targeted e-mails and other tools to solicit feedback in planning the new site features. Scholastic also studied web analytics reports and individual visitor sessions to break down how teachers and parents were navigating the site.

With better information, Scholastic next redesigned Scholastic.com and launched the new site in July in time for back-to-school planning for teachers. Teaching materials, including lesson plans and unit plans, are now organized by grade and subject matter. For an annual fee of \$34.95, teachers also can access Printables, a new

## Tools of the trade

A breakdown of web site features deployed by Top 500 retailers

Feature or function	Number of Top 500 retailers
Keyword search	458
Daily/seasonal specials	446
Enlarged product view	402
What's new	383
Affiliate program	349
Advanced search	327
Online gift certificates	306
Rich media	304
Outlet center	285
E-mail a friend	281
Coupons/rebates	278
Top sellers	247
Site personalization	236
Alternative payments	222
Store locator	221
Wish list	204
Customer reviews	183
Catalog quick order	181
Mapping	150
Product customization	147
Live chat	113
Pre-orders	112
Online circular	110
Product comparisons	106
Syndicated content	97
RSS/podcasts/ social networking	95
Video	74
Registry	71
Buy online/ pick up in store	43
Auction	29

Source: The Internet Retailer Top 500 Guide

www.internetretailer.com

digital library that gives subscribers options to customize content, make and label digital files, and search by different combinations such as quick find, grade, subject and keyword.

Teachers and parents like the new site. Since the web site was redesigned, traffic to Scholastic.com has increased by 20% and more than 8,000 teachers have signed up for the new digital library. "The site redesign gives teachers, parents and students what they want most: deeper content and faster features and functions to access and use that content," Radwell says.

### Sweat the details

The process of redesigning an e-commerce site, especially a site with advanced features, takes time. A small or medium-sized retailer will take about six months to implement a new design; big web merchants with large inventories and multiple shopping tools can take up to 14 months. Designers and marketing managers look

## Latest and greatest

More Top 500 retailers are adding user-generated and value-added features

Advanced features	Number of Top 500 retailers
Dynamic imaging	385
Product recommendations	340
Real-time product availability	208
Product ratings	188
Blogs	88
Mouse over	26
Product wikis	10
Widgets	7
Gadgets	3
Mash-ups	3

Source: The Internet Retailer Top 500 Guide

closely at the different paths visitors take as they arrive and leave the site and the amount of time and money shoppers spend on product pages. With a better understanding of how visitors are navigating and shopping their site, designers then complete a detailed features analysis of their competitors' e-commerce sites, rank

their priorities and write a formal implementation plan. The plan usually includes a 12-month timeline for the features and functions the retailer expects to add each quarter.

"It's tempting to want to have every new bell and whistle, but an implementation timeline helps retailers focus on adding only the most pertinent new features that will positively impact their business," says Betsy Emery, founder and chief executive officer of Tellus, a Cincinnati retail web site design firm. "Retailers must know in detail how customers are using their site and then implement only the best new tools that will hook shoppers and increase traffic and sales conversions."

Due diligence and market research help retailers do a better job of meeting customer expectations. For example, L'Oréal USA Inc. used competitive analysis and feedback from cosmetics professionals as the foundation for re-launching Lancome-USA.com. When L'Oréal USA re-launched the site in May, a top priority was developing features and functions that made it easier for customers to

**Scholastic** TEACHERS PARENTS KIDS SHOP

SEARCH Scholastic.com

TEACHING RESOURCES STUDENT ACTIVITIES BOOKS & AUTHORS CONNECT

Welcome to Scholastic.com Sign in or register

**CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**  
**Reading Workshop Strategies**  
 STRUCTURE YOUR CLASSROOM FOR READING SUCCESS.  
 A Master Teacher Shows You How

**BOOK CLUBS**  
 Press on Order  
 Read Clubs  Other Clubs

**Scholastic in the Classroom**  
 Scholastic.com featured on the most used of Scholastic.com in your classroom

**TEACHING RESOURCES**  
 Tools, activities, and 10,000+ teaching ideas at your fingertips

**STUDENT ACTIVITIES**  
 Online activities that bring learning to life

**BOOKS & AUTHORS**  
 Your new center for teaching with 50,000+ titles

**CONNECT**  
 Share ideas, discuss needs, and participate in special events

With better features and navigation, the redesigned Scholastic.com is drawing higher traffic and more subscribers to Printables, a new digital library.