

Ten Focus Points for an eCommerce Business

Employing these practices are the best chance an organization, regardless of size and market presence, has to gain its fair share of the internet market.

1. Know your strengths and weaknesses

For years, traditional retailers have visited competitors' stores to benchmark themselves. Do you do this on the web? In the absence of empirical comparisons, how can an online retailer know whether its online store performs better than competitive sites or whether it lags the pack? Today's benchmarking technologies enable any online retailer to quantify where its site ranks against its competitors, understand gaps, and take steps to improve. Smart retailers benchmark early and often.

2 Know your users

Where do they live, from which networks do they visit, what connection speeds do they enjoy, what are their peak usage times and patterns of site visitation? These are critical questions for performance leaders. Retailers who know their users can improve their overall performance and online experiences. Internet performance measurement technologies can put hard metrics on these experiences and let retailers recoup lost revenue opportunities.

3. Test the entire system

Just as you can't know a person's health from a single data point such as blood pressure, the vitality of an online retail site can't be determined by looking only at a handful of IT metrics such as server CPU utilization or network quality of service. Tests that exercise the entire application infrastructure, from the "outside-in" and across all relevant systems should be put in place.

4. Monitor what matters

Over many years, traditional retailers have developed a wide range of sales-related incentives and other programs to encourage offline store appeal, customer loyalty, higher average orders, repeat business, word of mouth referrals and so on. Warranties, discount coupons, gift certificates, customer services and seasonal specials are among these popular techniques. Many retailers often focus on the effectiveness of the buying process, to the detriment of the other business processes that the web site supports. Today leading retailers use comprehensive testing methodologies that go well beyond the front door of the home page. They can test every important business function on the site; for example, whether the store locator works as expected, whether gift certificates can be redeemed with ease, and whether product warranty language is accessible online. Modern e-retail environments do much more than bring in top line revenue; they feature many end-user capabilities that can save retailers money.

5. Keep third parties honest

Few online retailers, even the biggest ones, deliver their entire online store on their own. Third party providers generate advertising, produce virtual models, manage credit card payments, and perform other functions. All too often, it is assumed these operations are efficiently and seamlessly bolted into the customer's browser. Many online retailers have yet to put these functions to the performance test.

6. Seek internal alignment

Product line marketing managers, webmasters, interactive programmers, traditional information technology professionals and operations executives don't necessarily share a common language or a set of shared beliefs. One example: marketers love to show large images of the newest products or promotions. Operations teams grumble over ballooning page weights. Few things can do as much damage to a site's responsiveness and visitor experience as misalignment between design and delivery. Leading online retail organizations create shared performance metrics that aligns every group around end -user goals and

considerations.

7. Take a geography lesson

It is considered very bad in traditional retail when a shopper's experience in a store on the East Coast is significantly different from the experience of a shopper in San Francisco. The same is true of the online experience. But many e-retailers don't realize how different their web site experience can be for far-flung users. Retailers shouldn't let geographical performance issues lead to lower conversion rates for remote shoppers.

8. Link application performance to business performance

Intuitively we know high-speed, highly available online retail web sites are good for business. We also know that slow, inaccessible sites are not good for business. But many people don't know or don't quantify just how bad for business these conditions can be. Beyond a dip in online sales as punishment for bad performance, costs can increase with additional volumes in the call center; channel switching can erode margins; alternate channel efforts and other programs and problems can crop up when a site is not optimized. Leading retailers connect the dots and make informed decisions about the experiences they deliver for maximum result.

9. Manage change aggressively

What do traditional retailers do when same store sales decline quarter over quarter? They investigate, make a change, and then test to see if the change worked. It's the same with online retail sites except changes online can be tested well before they go live. Aggressive online retail operations use continuous metrics that help isolate potential problems, make changes, measure the effect of those changes in advance, go live with the appropriate choices, and then validate that these alterations are having the desired outcome.

10. Evolve the metrics over time

Online retail health hinges on ongoing checks, constant tunings, and vigilance to guarantee that as users evolve, the site evolves in lockstep. A retailer who is brand new to online performance can follow a progressive, predictable path. First make sure the lights are on ... site availability. Next, confirm that the checkout lines are short ... site response time. Finally, ensure that the experience is consistent. Focus first on increasing application performance to serve the top line and then increase manageability of the online store to serve the bottom line.