

## ECOMMERCE – A PLAN

Planning an ECommerce website is like building a house – architecture and budget need to be agreed before the decoration.

**AN AGREED REQUIREMENTS SPECIFICATION MUST BE DRAWN UP AS THE FIRST STAGE BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE IS DONE – ANY OTHER APPROACH WILL ONLY LEAD TO CONFUSION AND WORSE.**

Once an **AGREED REQUIREMENTS SPECIFICATION** has been agreed then solutions need to be evaluated and costed against that specification are:

- 1. Project management**
- 2. Hardware**
- 3. Design and software**
- 4. Site marketing**



### **1. Project management:**

All aspects of the project need to be managed. Decide who is going to do it and properly plan the requirements, activities, outcomes, milestones and timings.

### **2. Hardware:**

Your choices here are a managed service or your own server. The security and disaster recovery aspect that is achieved by hosting with a major provider is very important. Only go with your own server if you have the experience and facilities.

### **3. Design and Software:**

#### ***Site design***

Develop site templates and test them with real people. They have to be easy to use and navigate. Don't let "design" drive the site; let ease of use and sales drive the "design". Think how the customer thinks.

#### ***Software***

At least 5 solutions need to be considered.

- 1. Updating***
- 2. Shopping cart***
- 3. Forum***
- 4. EMail***
- 5. Statistics***

## **1. Updating**

There are 2 realistic routes here. Either an online or an offline, PC based content management system (CMS). The online CMS can be either an Open Source CMS (Open Source means any application that has been made available, generally free, to developers to view and modify freely. Examples of Open Source applications are MySQL and PHP) or commercial.

There are pros and cons to both routes. An online system is available to anyone with relevant security clearance anywhere any time. A PC based system is, obviously, limited to the PCs running the licenses. An example of a PC based system is Macromedia Contribute which integrates with Dreamweaver. There are a whole range of online Commercial and Open Source options such as Drupal, Joomla, and Website Baker etc. However, even this is complicated by the fact that some of the shopping cart solutions also contain CMS that may be sufficient for many companies' requirements.

## **2. Shopping cart and CRM**

There are also 2 realistic routes for the shopping cart – Open Source or commercial.



There are excellent Open Source shopping carts such as OSCommerce and Zen, but also excellent commercial solutions such as Actinic.

There are other factors to consider with the shopping cart:

- a. Does it have its own or does it easily integrate with your exiting stock control systems?
- b. Does it integrate easily with accounting systems (e.g. Sage, QuickBooks)?
- c. Does it have or integrate easily with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems that may be proposed in future?

## **3. Forum**

Many CMS have good integrated forums but if they do not our recommendation would be to use a good Open Source package such as PunBB or phpBB. They are free, robust and easy to integrate and customise into any site.

## **4. Email**

Most CMS, shopping carts and forums have EMail solutions. However, some solutions are very basic. If the chosen shopping cart solution that best meets the ECommerce and other requirements does not have an effective integrated EMail solution and if the same be true of the CMS and forum solutions then applications such as Active Campaign are an alternative solution.

## 5. Statistics

This is arguably the most important part of the package. If you do not know how visitors to your website and in the shop are behaving, what turns them on and what turns them off then it is far, far harder to improve sales and site profitability. Commercial applications such as WebTrends and ClickTracks need to be evaluated for best fit.

## 4. Site marketing

There are 4 major areas to consider here.

1. **Offline marketing** – e.g. in-store. What works most cost effectively to drive traffic and orders via the web from non-web activities.



2. **Site optimisation** – how to make sure technical structure, copy, content, back-links and a range of other factors are initially and remain optimised so that as many high search engine placements on relevant searches are obtained.
3. **Pay per click and other online marketing** – how to get traffic from advertising against key words and phrases used in search engines and from adverts on other sites.

4. **Email** – how to grow the EMail list and use it to grow profitable sales.

### In summary:

- Manage the project
- Think how the customer thinks
- Get excellent software to make finding product and price easy
- Make terms clear and payment simple
- Ensure you are in stock and have achievable delivery timescales
- Make sure you have a good CRM system and clear communications – mail, phone, EMail
- Market the site appropriately
- Know what's going on – use your stats to test, track and try
- Cost ..... well how long is a piece of string, but you could be up and running for far less than the cost of new premises!!!