



Must-Have eCommerce Features

by Sucharita Mulpuru, January 29, 2013

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Great Site Navigation And Product Detail Pages Can Attract Shoppers

A strong home page with key features like clear product categories and helpful on-site search are essential to ensuring that customers who land on any given page can find exactly what they're looking for. Product detail pages that have extensive information are critical to ensuring that shoppers add items to their web carts.

Best-In-Class Checkout Features Are Essential To Strong Sales

“Boring” checkouts that mimic successful eCommerce sites and that consumers are used to are often the most effective, particularly for critical actions like completing a transaction. Experimenting with checkout functionality can hinder sales and conversions, as consumers will abandon an experience more frequently if it's foreign to them.

Non-Site Investments In Areas Like Customer Service Are Also Critical

While website investments are essential, eCommerce also involves fulfillment and re-engagement. Providing shoppers with creative new ways to receive products, servicing customer needs effectively and promptly, and providing social tools that allow shoppers to share their experiences are the icing on the superior eCommerce experience cake.



Must-Have eCommerce Features

Road Map: The Retail eCommerce Playbook

by [Sucharita Mulpuru](#)

with [Patti Freeman Evans](#) and Douglas Roberge

WHY READ THIS REPORT

Companies often struggle with how to prioritize the countless issues that populate eCommerce to-do lists. This chapter of the retail eCommerce playbook is a prescriptive look at the industry standards and opportunities for differentiation in a retail eCommerce experience. We've divided the key opportunities into features and functionality to improve a site's navigation, the product detail page, and the checkout experience. The report also discusses additional areas of opportunity such as fulfillment, customer service, and multichannel execution. Much of the data in this report comes from retailer insights provided in "The State Of Retailing Online," an annual Shop.org study conducted by Forrester Research.

Table Of Contents

2 **Key Features Have Percolated To The Top Over Time**

Strong Navigation Experiences Are Essential When Navigating Large Product Catalogs

Powerful Product Detail Pages Convert Browsers Into Buyers

Effective Checkout Ensures That Sites "Close The Deal" Quickly

7 **Areas Beyond The Website Are Just As Critical**

WHAT IT MEANS

9 **The Site Experience Is Critical**

Notes & Resources

Forrester used data from "The State Of Retailing Online," an annual Shop.org study conducted by Forrester Research, in the writing of this report.

Related Research Documents

[The State Of Retailing Online 2011: Merchandising, Headcount, And Global Strategies](#)

January 29, 2013

[Managing The Cross-Touchpoint Customer Journey](#)

December 3, 2012

[Website Functionality Benchmark 2011: Mass Merchants](#)

December 19, 2011



KEY FEATURES HAVE PERCOLATED TO THE TOP OVER TIME

The visibility of websites and the willingness of the retail industry to share best practices at events such as the Shop.org Annual Summit and in publications like *Internet Retailer* mean that companies have quickly come to realize which features in eCommerce work and which are merely nice-to-haves. Companies quickly learn from the successes and failures of their peers; as a result, the eCommerce industry has a set of established factors that are important for driving success. The key areas of retail eCommerce sites that are critical to success are the core elements of: 1) site navigation, particularly the components of the home page and category pages as well as the top and bottom navigation bars; 2) the product detail pages; and 3) the checkout pages (see Figure 1). Within each of those large buckets are a number of features and functions that are essential to creating superior user experiences that maximize a site's conversion rate. We explore a more extensive list of all the features in a recent update to a report for this playbook, but we include here a synthesis of the most effective features for retailers.¹

Strong Navigation Experiences Are Essential When Navigating Large Product Catalogs

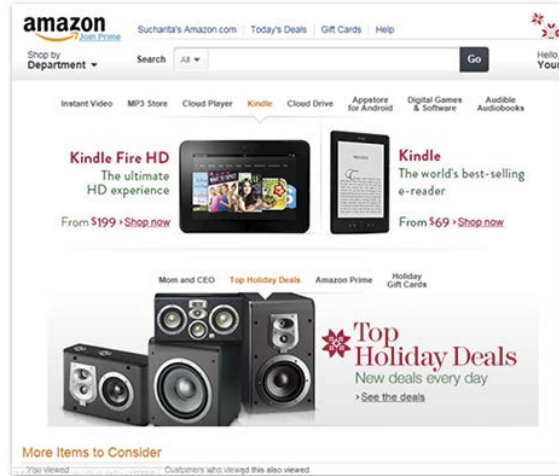
Certain pages and elements, such as the home page and site search bar, are gateways to a site's content; the hierarchy of how these pages and the elements within them are laid out can determine whether or not shoppers easily find the information they seek. While some elements have become industry standards — such as vertical scroll, a left navigation bar, and top navigation bars with universal information like a shopping cart and category links — specific executions of these pages can vary. How retailers execute the details of core pages like home pages is important because eCommerce sites often have large product assortments in which only a small amount of inventory is visible at a time. A well-designed navigation experience can enable shoppers to find items quickly and accurately with minimal clicks. To achieve this, retailers say that (see Figure 2):

- **Supporting “spearfishers” is critical.** Consumers who visit eCommerce sites often have specific products and/or brands in mind before they initiate a transaction. As a result, easy-to-use site search and clear site departments are essential to supporting those shoppers. While site search is an industry standard, how search results pages are laid out can have an even bigger impact on sales. In fact, retailers we surveyed said that on-site search filters and the ability to buy from the search results page have been very helpful in matching users to their goals. Even customers who choose to navigate via department links in a top or side navigation bar find that rollovers and dropdowns that make more of the site visible without cluttering a page can be essential.
- **Features that encourage discovery are also important.** While most users of eCommerce sites tend to be spearfishers, more sites are recognizing the power of engaging shoppers through discovery and serendipity. To that end, companies also find that incorporating links in their top navigation bar to sections such as “what's new” or sale areas can be extremely beneficial. These sections not only generate incremental demand for retailers but often provide an incentive for shoppers to return.

Figure 1 The Key Areas Of Retail eCommerce Websites

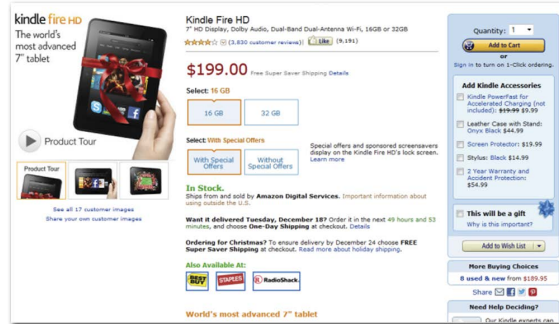
General site navigation

- On-site search
- Taxonomy
- Navigation
- Category pages



Product detail pages

- Imagery
- Product description
- Other selling tools



Checkout

- Alternative payments
- Order processing
- Saved carts



Source: Amazon.com website

89561

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Figure 2 Site Navigation Opportunities

Feature	Description	Value to retailers
Sale/clearance pages	Persistent link in the top or side navigation to a section for marked-down or discounted products	High
On-site search filters	Ability to reduce the results of a search results page to a smaller assortment (e.g., colors or sizes of shoes)	High
Add to cart from search results page	“Buy” buttons integrated onto product array pages (versus only on the product detail page)	High
“What’s new” sections	Link in the top or side navigation that displays new items	High
Dropdowns and rollovers	Ability to search for subcategories from the top navigation without displaying all those subcategories	High
“View all” on search results pages	Ability to display all items from a search on a single page	High
Catalog quick shop	Ability to type a number into a search box and retrieve a specific product detail page	High
Easy site taxonomy	Clear site categories and subcategories for shoppers	High
Wishlists	Ability for shoppers to sign in and save multiple items to a stored function	High

Source: “The State Of Retailing Online 2011,” a Shop.org study conducted by Forrester Research

89561

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Powerful Product Detail Pages Convert Browsers Into Buyers

While the higher-level site navigation pages and features are gateways to site content, product detail pages rest deeper within the site experience and are core to selling, as they provide the data and information that shoppers need to make decisions about specific products. These pages contain all the visual imagery, text, and specifications that shoppers use to evaluate products. The best product detail pages provide richer information than that which shoppers would find themselves by physically inspecting goods or by talking to a sales associate — as on Amazon.com’s product detail pages in the books category. As a result, retailers find that (see Figure 3):

- **You can never have too much detail on a product detail page.** While some companies often fear that they are overloading their shoppers with too much information and that their pages may be too long or too detailed, consumers and the most successful retailers tell us the opposite: More information always trumps less. Details such as extensive product specs, ratings and reviews, sizing information (for clothes), and related products are essential to helping shoppers feel comfortable in completing a transaction.

- The more visual the tool, the better.** While product descriptions, ratings/reviews, and written product details are essential (and often the most common), many retailers also find value in the maxim that a picture is worth a thousand words. Many retailers tell us that alternative images, zoom functionality, and even video are critical to converting browsers to buyers; all of these can bring an item alive and render it in a rich and robust way for shoppers.

Figure 3 Product Detail Page Opportunities

Feature	Description	Value to retailers
Customer ratings and reviews	Testimonials (or critiques) of products provided by shoppers; usually displayed below a product description on a product detail page	High
Alternative images	Additional photos of a product that showcase different angles, use cases, or features of the product	High
Related imagery/products	Ancillary items that can be purchased with a given item	High
Recommendations	Products featured by a retailer that present other items they would like the shopper to see (e.g., other items that are frequently purchased)	High
Video	Video demonstrations of items on the product detail page	High
Zoom	Ability to magnify items and their features while also maintaining screen resolution	High
Side-by-side product comparisons	Attributes of products with comparable features presented together	Medium

Source: “The State Of Retailing Online 2011,” a Shop.org study conducted by Forrester Research

89561

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

Effective Checkout Ensures That Sites “Close The Deal” Quickly

While the earlier pages in the eCommerce experience are the bait that attracts shoppers, a rock-solid checkout is the hook that reels in the buyer. Unfortunately, many retailers face challenges with their checkout process, ranging from poorly designed experiences that ask for extraneous information to high cart-abandonment rates. This is ironic given that the key success factors for strong checkout are not a mystery, and retailers that deviate from these best practices often face higher abandonment rates. In fact, while site navigation and product detail pages may be able to withstand some experimentation, changing a traditional checkout experience can be detrimental. Retailers have repeatedly told us, for instance, that when they make drastic changes to checkout — such as changing to single-screen checkout — they experience a temporary decline in conversion rates due to the time it takes for shoppers to get used to the new way of checking out. That said, retailers told us that the key success factors for eCommerce checkout are (see Figure 4):

- **The ability to easily complete a transaction.** The key to making it easy to complete a transaction is to reduce friction in the checkout process and pre-emptively answer questions that may stump a user. Moments that stump shoppers include not knowing the total cost of shipping, not knowing how much more information is needed to complete a transaction, forcing shoppers to enter billing and shipping information twice (when they are the same), and not providing clear error messages for problems with customer information. Consumers can also get frustrated by not having their carts saved or by not being able to easily input promotional codes. To this end, retailers have found success by exposing shipping information on the first cart page or providing shipping calculators, having crystal-clear error messages that show why a particular field was declined, providing a status bar that indicates how far along in the checkout process a shopper is, and enabling a consumer to check a box to make shipping and billing information the same.

- **Flexibility.** While the ease of transaction is critical, so is the ability of shoppers to make choices. Consumers want options in terms of how they pay for items, how they ship those items, and where those items are delivered. Some retailers, particularly those for perishable goods, provide delivery windows. In general, the ability to give shoppers options correlates with higher conversion rates.²

Figure 4 Checkout Opportunities

Feature	Description	Value to retailers
Persistent/saved shopping cart	Preserving items that consumers have added to their cart for at least seven days	High
Alternative payments	Tools such as PayPal that give shoppers additional ways to pay online beyond credit or debit cards	High
Recommendations on the checkout page	Additional products that shoppers have not already added to a cart and that the shopper would likely value	High
Guest checkout	An option from the cart page that enables shoppers to have faster checkout without signing up for an account	High
Multiple shipping methods	Options that allow consumers to select faster delivery times or break up orders to receive items faster	High
Saved customer order history	Ability to retrieve previous orders via a user name and password	High
Promotions automatically deducted	Discounts or savings are automatically calculated at checkout rather than by entering a promotional code	High
Single-screen checkout	Checkout functionality in which all the shopper's information is captured without delivering new web pages	Medium

Source: "The State Of Retailing Online 2011," a Shop.org study conducted by Forrester Research

89561

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

AREAS BEYOND THE WEBSITE ARE JUST AS CRITICAL

The core site experience that involves key web pages is critical, but truly best-in-class retail eCommerce experiences have superior execution after the checkout confirmation page as well. Forrester's Website Functionality Benchmark provides a series of questions to ensure that retailers have maximized the "after sale" and non-site elements of their business as well (see Figure 5). In particular, retailers should master:

- **Customer service.** Strong customer service — which also encompasses elements of fulfillment, returns, and delivery visibility — is critical to ensuring that packages are successfully and accurately delivered and that shoppers in need of ancillary support receive it. This is perhaps one of the most critical components of an eCommerce experience and one where companies like Amazon and Zappos.com have managed to excel — attracting legions of loyal followers while also setting standards for superior customer experiences.
- **Community.** The integration of social channels is also becoming increasingly commonplace in retail. While offerings such as Facebook pages may not be terribly useful for most retailers, the opportunity to share purchases or even to have a content blog that attracts brand enthusiasts and supports search engine optimization can help drive more traffic to a site. Sites like Wet Seal have crafted successful social experiences for years by allowing shoppers to create outfits, a feature that supports merchandising cross-sells and drives sticky site experiences.
- **Multichannel execution.** Most companies sell through multiple channels; as a result, companies need to ensure that these businesses are cohesive and are executed in a way that is easy for the shopper.³ This can mean providing the opportunity to pick up items in a store or to have endless aisle functionality, where shoppers can track down out-of-stock items via the Web. Strong multichannel experiences allow information to be passed between channels and provide seamless views of shoppers; increasingly, these are table stakes for a strong eCommerce experience.

Figure 5 Additional eCommerce Investment Areas

Multichannel	
In-store returns	Can users return online purchases directly to a physical store?
Online versus in-store availability	Does the site clearly display which items are “online only” or “store only” items or “both”?
Function	Does the site have a store-locator function?
Accessibility	Is there a store-locator function accessible on multiple relevant pages within a site and easy to find/highly visible?
In-store-pickup policy	Is there an in-store-pickup policy?
Ship-to-store	Is ship-to-store functionality available?
User benefit	Does the site remove the shipping charge if consumers use the ship-to-store feature?
Community	
Tagging	Can users tag products (e.g., Amazon.com’s use of tags for products)?
Product information	Can users use social computing media to share product information with their peers?
Videos and pictures	Are user-generated photos/videos displayed on product pages?
Online community	Can users ask product questions (Q&A) to the community directly from product detail pages (e.g., like Back Country and Petco are doing)?
Availability and contextual element of online customer service	
Help section/contact us section accessibility	How readily can customers access customer service help throughout the website?
Telephone help access	How available is telephone support?
Self-help accessibility	How available is online self-help for customer service (help section, FAQs, customer service search, virtual agents)?
Email accessibility	How available is email support?
Click-to-call	Does the site offer click-to-call and display it consistently throughout the site?
Live chat accessibility	How available is live help (click-to-call, click-to-chat, cobrowsing)?
Social or community customer service accessibility	How available is social or community customer service?
Returns and exchange	Is a return/exchange policy present, at least in the footer navigation and customer service section of the site?
Shipping policy	Is a shipping policy present, at least in the footer navigation and customer service section of the site?
Mailing list options	Does the site have opt-in/opt-out (of mailing list) options/policies that are clearly defined?
Security policy	Is the security policy/security vendor logo clearly displayed?

Source: A sample set of criteria from Forrester’s Website Functionality Benchmark

89561

Source: Forrester Research, Inc.

WHAT IT MEANS

THE SITE EXPERIENCE IS CRITICAL

While companies invest a tremendous amount in selecting the perfect eCommerce platform or in hiring specific talent for various roles within a web organization, the most critical determinants of success are the features and functionality that a site employs during the key moments of a transaction. To determine how to create and prioritize such a list, eBusiness executives must:

- **Audit their site first.** Forrester’s Website Functionality Benchmark and the Website User Experience Review are strong tools that evaluate the specific weaknesses of a given experience. Many improvements to conversion are not extraordinary new features; in fact, they are the rather commonplace yet effective features, such as showing shipping charges on the first checkout page, that are critical to success. Take as an example sites like Amazon and eBay, which aren’t aesthetically beautiful sites but are heavily tested by the retailers’ internal QA teams: These sites are highly functional and deliver on key customer goals.
- **Look at their competitors and “comparison shop” for inspiration.** Sometimes, industry standards are determined not by what is the most popular feature but by what a company’s competitors offer. In the consumer electronics category, deferred billing programs and financing options at checkout can be critical to driving conversion; the same feature in the grocery category is likely to be far less effective. In the latter category, saved orders and order history, dynamic shopping carts, and one-click checkout are likely to be far more effective.
- **Recognize that these must-haves are primarily about the desktop.** The mobile device is another challenge from a design and development perspective, particularly for site navigation, landing pages, and checkout. The must-haves for small screens form an even smaller list than the must-haves for the desktop; Forrester’s “The State Of Retailing Online” joint study with Shop.org has a list of features that retailers have built for phones and tablets.⁴ The takeaway: Many companies are dispensing with custom mobile development and changing their design and development processes to be compatible with a responsive design framework so that they can take advantage of strong content across the greatest number of devices possible.

ENDNOTES

¹ This is the second of two reports that detail the findings from “The State Of Retailing Online, 2011,” a Shop.org research survey conducted by Forrester Research. Specific topics covered in this report include site merchandising tactics, headcount dedicated to various eCommerce functions such as merchandising and IT, and details regarding the execution of global online selling efforts. Retailers that we surveyed reported that their investments in site merchandising have bolstered eCommerce revenues, as conversion

rates for most web retailers increased between 2010 and 2011. Retail eBusiness professionals can use this report to benchmark their performance against their peers. This is an update to a report of the same name originally published on October 13, 2011. See the January 29, 2013, "[The State Of Retailing Online 2011: Merchandising, Headcount, And Global Strategies](#)" report.

- ² In response to the question, "Thinking of the last time you put items in your shopping cart but did not finish the online purchase, which of the following best describes why you did not complete the transaction?" US online adults gave a wide variety of responses, including: shipping and handling costs were too high (33%); shipping and handling costs were listed too late during the checkout process (17%); I didn't want to register with a site (10%); the website didn't have the payment option I wanted to use (e.g., credit, cash on delivery, PayPal, etc.) (6%); the website did not accept the credit card type I wanted to use (e.g., Visa, JCB, Mastercard, etc.) (3%); and the website did not allow me to ship to an address different from my billing address (2%). Source: North American Technographics® Retail Online Benchmark Recontact Survey, Q3 2012 (US).
- ³ For more information on managing the multichannel customer journey, see the December 3, 2012, "[Managing The Cross-Touchpoint Customer Journey](#)" report.
- ⁴ Forrester partners with Shop.org annually to survey online retail executives on their adoption of various web-related technologies and the investment levels associated with those initiatives. This year, Forrester focused very specifically on mobile technologies (defined as both smartphone and tablet efforts). See the September 25, 2012, "[The State Of Retailing Online 2012: Investments In Mobile And Tablet Commerce](#)" report.

About Forrester

Global marketing and strategy leaders turn to Forrester to help them make the tough decisions necessary to capitalize on shifts in marketing, technology, and consumer behavior. We ensure your success by providing:

- Data-driven insight to understand the impact of changing consumer behavior.
- Forward-looking research and analysis to guide your decisions.
- Objective advice on tools and technologies to connect you with customers.
- Best practices for marketing and cross-channel strategy.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To find out how Forrester Research can help you be successful every day, please contact the office nearest you, or visit us at www.forrester.com. For a complete list of worldwide locations, visit www.forrester.com/about.

CLIENT SUPPORT

For information on hard-copy or electronic reprints, please contact Client Support at +1 866.367.7378, +1 617.613.5730, or clientsupport@forrester.com. We offer quantity discounts and special pricing for academic and nonprofit institutions.



Forrester Focuses On eBusiness & Channel Strategy Professionals

Responsible for building a multichannel sales and service strategy, you must optimize how people, processes, and technology adapt across a rapidly evolving set of customer touchpoints. Forrester helps you create forward-thinking strategies to justify decisions and optimize your individual, team, and corporate performance.

« ERIC CHANG, client persona representing eBusiness & Channel Strategy Professionals