

# HOW TO CHOOSE THE RIGHT SHOPPING CART SOFTWARE FOR YOUR BUSINESS



A FREE GUIDE FROM BIGCOMMERCE

# HI THERE.

This short but useful guide will help you choose the right shopping cart software for your business. We'll show you the six absolutely critical things you must consider when setting up your online store if you want to stack the odds of success in your favor.

Selling online is more than just choosing the right shopping cart software, however. You need to think about where your business is now and where you'd like it to be in 12 months or two years from now.

Do you want to be the next Amazon.com? Or do you simply want to make enough money from your online store to quit your job? Whatever your needs are, they factor into your decision. The shopping cart software you choose forms the foundation for your success, so making the right choice is really important.

Sound good? Great, let's get started...

## CONSIDERATION #1: TECHNICAL ABILITY

Are you a tech guru or do computers freak you out a bit? Different shopping cart software lends itself to different levels of technical expertise.

### **Read this if you're closer to being a tech guru:**

If you're completely comfortable with terms like HTML and CSS then you're probably a web designer, a developer or a dabbler. If you're considering customizing the look, layout and feel of your store's design then you need to make sure the shopping cart software you choose actually gives you full, unrestricted access to do so.

What do we mean by that?

Well, some shopping cart software doesn't let you edit *all* of your store's design elements. For example, you might only be able to edit the HTML of the home page, or just the stylesheet and no HTML content.

You also need to make sure you have a way to add files and photos to your store. Can you upload them via FTP? And if so, is that available on all plans or do you have to pay extra for it? These costs can seem small initially, but believe us - they add up over time.

Finally, you need to make sure there are plenty of *free* store designs to choose from as these are the starting point for your design efforts. Sure you can build your design from scratch but it's much easier and faster to customize an existing, professionally-designed layout than to create your own from scratch.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You need full, unrestricted access to edit *all* HTML and CSS files
- You should have FTP access to your store's files at no charge
- You should have dozens of store designs to choose from

### **Read this if computers freak you out a bit:**

If you're not a web designer but want your store to look as good as Amazon.com then don't worry - it's easier than you think. There are a few things you need to look for though.

First, the shopping cart software you choose should include dozens and dozens of built-in, *free* store designs you can choose from. And these designs should be visually appealing - they shouldn't look like they were designed in 1995!

You should avoid shopping cart software that charges extra for "premium" or "professional" store designs, because this typically means the store designs included for free are below

average in terms of design quality and this could negatively affect how your online store ranks in the search engines.

(This next bit's a bit technical, so skip it if you like)

How can a poor design affect your search rankings? Well if, your store's HTML code isn't table-less and W3C compliant then Google and other search engines might have trouble "reading" your page content and may not be able to figure out how to best display your online store for the keywords you're trying to rank for, meaning people won't be able to find your online store.

(Phew, OK no more technical stuff - we promise)

Finally, you should choose shopping cart software that's *preferred* by web designers. Why? Well, if you decide to invest a few hundred bucks in a professional design (*highly* recommended, by the way) then you'll want to work with a design company that understands the shopping cart software you're using inside-out.

If they've never worked with your shopping cart software before then creating a design will take longer and therefore cost you more money while they charge YOU to figure out how the software works.

Ouch!

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You should have dozens of *free* store designs to choose from
- You should avoid providers who charge for "premium" store designs
- These store designs should be table-less and W3C compliant
- You should choose shopping cart software that's preferred by web designers

## CONSIDERATION #2: HOSTED OR INSTALLED?

From a technical point of view you'll need to choose whether your shopping cart software is hosted and managed by someone else, or whether it's installed and managed by you or your company.

Here's a quick litmus test to work out which is better for you:

*Do you have at least one person in your office who could build, manage, secure and maintain one or more web server running Linux or Windows?*

For most people, the answer will be "no". If you answered no or you're unsure then you should lean towards hosted software.

So what's hosted software anyway? Well, here are a few popular hosted software applications, some of which you probably use every day:

- Gmail, Yahoo Mail and Hotmail
- Google, Facebook and Twitter
- LinkedIn, Flickr and Pandora

Hosted software runs in your web browser and is completely managed and maintained by the company who builds the software. You never have to install anything and you don't have to worry about upgrades, security, hardware, etc - they take care of all that "geek stuff" so you can focus on what you do best - growing your business and making more of that sweet, sweet cash.

The good news with shopping cart software is that over 70% is offered as a hosted solution, meaning you can simply sign up and manage your online store using your favorite web browser.

Next, you need to know that not all hosted shopping cart software is created equally.

What do we mean by that? Well, there are two ways hosted shopping cart can be offered:

- Hosted on servers that are managed by a professional web hosting company
- Hosted on servers that are managed by the company who built the software

***Important: You should never, ever, ever, ever use shopping cart software that is not hosted on servers managed by a professional web hosting company.***

Some shopping cart software companies also setup and run their servers (a fancy word that means "powerful computers") from their corporate offices instead of from data centers of a professional web hosting company, which is a huge red flag.

Here's why:

- Professional web hosting companies are *experts* at what they do. They invest tens of millions of dollars in their own data centers (the place where your servers physically reside), installing security devices to protect your servers (and therefore, your sensitive data such as orders and customer records) from unauthorized access.
- Professional web hosting companies have backup power that can last for hours (and sometimes days) if there's an earthquake or a state-wide power outage. Without power, computers don't work, meaning your online store is unavailable, so you can't take orders and make money.

Shopping cart software providers that setup and run servers in their own offices don't have anywhere near the same level of security that professional hosting companies do, meaning your data is easier to compromise.

They also can't deal with long power outages because they rely on the same power sources that you and I do in our homes - and we all know how reliable that is.

We recommend asking the shopping cart software providers you're considering this one simple question:

*“Do your web servers physically reside in your corporate office?”*

If the answer is “yes” then they should be avoided for the reasons outlined above.

Finally, you want your online store to be both lightning fast and built with the latest technology right?

Shopping cart software built with the latest technology is easier for software engineers to update, meaning you'll typically get more regular updates and new features which will make you more money.

PHP is the world's most popular programming language for the web and powers huge web applications like Facebook and Yahoo, so it's time tested and built to scale, meaning it's super reliable and won't go down if your online store receives thousands or even tens of thousands of visitors a day.

There are other web programming languages used to build shopping cart software, such as ASP and Ruby, however there are too many documented cases of security issues and downtime when using these programming languages on large scale projects, so they should be avoided.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You want shopping cart software that's hosted and managed for you
- You want to avoid shopping cart software providers whose web servers are physically located in their corporate offices and not a data center
- Your provider's web servers should be housed in a data center with advanced security measures and backup power generators

- You want shopping cart software built with PHP (the same technology trusted by Internet giants Facebook and Yahoo) because it's safe, secure and scales really well

## CONSIDERATION #3: EASE OF USE

Ease of use refers to how easy the shopping cart software is to use. While ease of use is relative, there's a really quick litmus test you can do to figure out if the shopping cart software you're considering is easy to use.

Just follow these steps:

1. Sign up for a demo or free trial of the different shopping cart software you're considering
2. Login to your demo or trial store
3. Without looking for help, figure out how to add a product to your online store

This litmus test is a great way to compare apples with apples. All shopping cart software provides a way to add products to your online store, and typically the software that makes this the easiest is the one you'll prefer to work with on an ongoing basis.

Remember: you or someone at your company will login to your online store every day, so ease of use is extremely important. The easier the software is to use, the more you can get done in the smallest amount of time.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You want shopping cart software that's easy to use
- You want shopping cart software that takes the fewest clicks possible to do the "every day" tasks, such as adding a product to your store

## CONSIDERATION #4: SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMIZATION

Search engine optimization (or SEO for short) is the process of optimizing your online store so it ranks highly in popular search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing.

There are two main ways you can optimize the SEO of your online store so you move up the ranks of the Google, Yahoo and Bing search results.

The first is something no shopping cart software can help you with, and that's *off-page optimization*. That means finding other websites to link back to yours, because the more websites that link back to yours, the higher you'll rank.

The second is *on-page optimization*, which is just a fancy way to describe changes you can make to the content (such as text, photos and META tags) of your online store to help it rank better in the search engines.

There's a variety of tools that come bundled with the best shopping cart software packages to help you optimize your online store for the search engines. The more tools you have available, the more of an impact you can have on your search rankings.

The tools you should look for are listed below:

- Ability to customize the page title, META keywords and META description for every single page (product pages and web pages) in your online store
- Search engine friendly page links, meaning your links shouldn't contain characters the search engines can't understand, such as "?", "&" or "=" . For example, a good search engine friendly link might look like this: <http://www.yourstore.com/products/Apple-iPod.html> while a non search engine friendly link might look like this: <http://www.yoursite.com/products.asp?i=291&b=apple&p=ipod>
- Ability to add ALT tags on product photos, which help you describe product photos to the search engines and thus can improve your rankings
- Table-less store designs. The quickest way to check for this is to visit a store in the shopping cart software's "Featured Clients" list. Right click on the page and choose the "View Source" option. If you can see a <table> tag then you should choose another provider because generally these store designs are harder to customize

You also want to look for shopping cart software which has been reviewed and critiqued by a search engine optimization expert. An SEO expert is someone who understands the intricacies of the search engines and who makes their living helping businesses get their websites ranking at the top of the search engines.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You want shopping cart software that gives you the ability to edit the page title, META keywords and META description of every page in your online store
- You want shopping cart software with search engine friendly links
- You want shopping cart software which lets you add ALT tags to images
- You want shopping cart software with table-less store designs

## CONSIDERATION #5: MARKETING TOOLS

When it comes to selling online, the hardest part is not in-fact choosing or setting up the shopping cart software - It's driving people to your online store so they buy from you.

The best shopping cart software will also include a variety of free tools to help you market your online store where your potential customers hang out online.

Listed below are the different ways your potential customers can find you online, as well as the marketing tools we recommend you use to reach them:

- Search engines - Most of your customers will start their online buying experience at Google. The shopping cart software you use should include a variety of tools that allow you to optimize your online store for the popular search engines, including Google, Yahoo and Bing.
- Search engine marketing - The colored ads that appear above and to the right of Google search results are called Google AdWords ads. The shopping cart software you use should make it easy to generate Google AdWords ads for your products so you can use Google's Pay Per Click (PPC) program to show ads for your products alongside Google's search results when a potential customer searches for keywords related to what you sell.
- eBay - The global online auction site eBay is the starting point for a lot of your potential customers. The shopping cart software you use should make it easy to list your products on (and take orders from) eBay as well as on your own online store, so you can get your products in front of the millions of people who use eBay every day.
- Facebook - More and more people are starting their online buying activities on Facebook. They ask for recommendations from friends and even shop right on Facebook. The shopping cart software you use should make it easy to "setup shop" on Facebook. That way, you can get your products in front of Facebook's 500 million+ users and start building your fan base, which you can turn into repeat customers and Word-of-Mouth raving fans.
- Mobile and smart phones - It's predicted that by 2013 mobile and smart phones (such as Apple's iPhone) will account for around 50% of all online purchases. The shopping cart software you choose should be optimized to allow your customers to browse and buy from their mobile and smart phones.
- Email marketing - According to the Direct Marketing Association, email marketing returns \$54 for every \$1 invested, which is a 5,400% return. The shopping cart software you choose should make it easy to collect newsletter subscribers and add your customers to your email list so you can follow up with them via email, send them coupon codes, special offers and more.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- Your shopping cart software should include tools that help you improve the search engine optimization of your online store
- Your shopping cart software should make it easy to generate Google AdWords ads for your products if you'd like to experiment with PPC
- Your shopping cart software should make it easy to list your products on - and accept orders from - eBay, as well as your own online store
- Your shopping cart software should include an easy way to list and share your products on Facebook
- Your shopping cart software should be optimized for mobile and smart phones
- Your shopping cart software should include email marketing capabilities so you can create and send email newsletters and promotions

## CONSIDERATION #6: REGULAR UPDATES

When it comes to shopping cart software, your ability to compete is only as good as the features you have at your disposal. Just like other industries, e-commerce is always changing so you want to choose shopping cart software that's regularly updated with new features that will give you an advantage over your competitors.

The shopping cart software you choose should have a track record of releasing not only new features, but useful features that will help you make more money, at least every 2 to 3 months. This means that 4 to 6 times a year your shopping cart software will be updated with new features that will improve your online store and help you reach more customers.

Be wary of shopping cart software that isn't updated regularly or whose updates aren't significant. This could mean their shopping cart software is built on outdated technology or it's not their primary focus - which could be crippling for your business.

Finally, there should be a simple way to share your feedback and ideas with your shopping cart software provider. They should make available a suite of online tools where you can submit a feature request and even vote on features submitted by other customers. They should take the most popular requested features and regularly update their shopping cart software to include them. Companies that do this are far and few between, but they *are* out there.

So to recap, here's what you should look for:

- You want shopping cart software that's updated at most every 2 to 3 months with *useful* features that will help you make more money
- You want to choose a shopping cart software provider that gives you a voice, allowing you to submit new feature ideas and vote on features suggested by other customers
- You want to choose a shopping cart software provider which will include new feature ideas from existing customers in their software updates

## THE GOOD NEWS

If you've made it this far then I'm sure you'll agree - there's A LOT to consider when choosing shopping cart software.

You know all of the things we've told you to look for in this guide? Well, the great news is that BigCommerce includes **all of them**.

Yep, every single one - everything from the search engine optimization tools all the way through to dozens of professional store designs, the ability to sell your products on eBay, Facebook and mobile phones, as well as tonnes of cool built-in marketing tools to help you attract lots of customers to your online store. You can even suggest new feature ideas and if enough other people like your idea then we'll build it right into BigCommerce within a few weeks!

Sweet hey?

BigCommerce is already used by thousands of business owners just like you to run their online stores and they love it. You can check out some [testimonials](#), watch a few [short videos](#) or see some of our [cool awards](#) (Inc 5000, Fast50, Codies) and [press coverage](#) (TechCrunch, Forbes, Internet Retailer, USA Today) if you like, but the best way to see if BigCommerce might be for you is to [give it a whirl](#) - there's a 15 day, fully functional free trial, no credit card required.

We're pretty sure you'll love it...

Regardless of the shopping cart software you go with, **we sincerely wish you the best of luck**. Oh, and if you have any questions we'd love to help. Just give us a buzz on 1-888-699-8911, flicks us an email ([sales@bigcommerce.com](mailto:sales@bigcommerce.com)), send us a tweet ([@bigcommerce](https://twitter.com/bigcommerce)) or write on [our Facebook wall](#).

Ciao for now!