



12 Things Every Ecommerce Company Should Be Doing

We selected Explore Consulting based on a superb reputation, domain expertise and a very reputable background in driving Ecommerce initiatives towards success. It was quite challenging to find a provider that could integrate our brand image with our operational demands – Explore’s expertise and professionalism has helped us to do just that. We look forward to many more successful projects with their team.

- Carla Hukee, Brand Manager, Niner Bikes



Perhaps you are a traditional brick and mortar retailer considering adding an online channel or an experienced e-commerce business that has been selling for some time. Either way, you have probably come to see the importance of having your customers find and transact with you online. In this age of the overly connected consumer and explosion of technology solutions, trying to determine what activities will have a meaningful impact on your bottom line can be confusing, not to mention time consuming. With this in mind, what are the most important things to focus on first and where should you go for help?

Let's start with the answer to the second question first: **Explore Consulting is a full service, Ecommerce consultancy and digital agency that can help deliver you results.** Yes, there are many other consultancies in the Ecommerce space and the list of digital agencies could fill multiple phone books, if they still existed. What separates Explore is our laser like focus on the 'and'. With over 900 clients that vary from 1-person shops to large enterprise customers, we've been delivering best-in-breed NetSuite Ecommerce websites for more than 13 years. We compliment this success with a team of digital marketers that focus exclusively on Ecommerce: from customer acquisition, product merchandising, web store conversion to building retention and advocacy programs. Come work with us and we can help you explore the strategies to your digital success.

In the meantime, here are 12 recommendations for where you should spend your time on creating online Ecommerce success:

- 1. Implement / Audit / Use Your Web Analytics:** If you've ever run a business, then you've heard the old mantra – "You can't manage what you can't measure." This is particularly true of online. While no measurement system is perfect, a good web analytics platform will help you to understand how your store is operating. The good news is that this no longer has to be an expensive proposition. Google Analytics is free and many other inexpensive platforms now exist that can extend your digital insights.

One caveat: Many businesses make the mistake of set it and forget it. Before the holiday shopping season is upon us, do yourself a favor and take the time to go through your web analytics install and make sure that everything is set up correctly. If you have changed your website since you implemented, you probably could use a look under the hood. Like anything else, maintenance is required. A few settings here and there can make a big difference to your reports. If you need help, we're here to help.

Make sure you create a culture of measurement. Our advice is have a measurement plan and stick to it. Don't try to measure everything under the sun. Set KPIs and goals. Most of all, make sure you understand what the numbers actually mean. While web analytics has become easier in some ways, it is also fairly common to misinterpret what your numbers are really telling you. As an example: Do you really understand how bounce rate is measured? Asking critical questions is paramount to making good business decisions. Explore offers both web analytics implementations & audits, reporting and data interpretation.

- 2. User Test and Re-Test Your Website:** Sure you think your website looks great. Your lead designer was thoroughly impressed with themselves. Your products are perfectly suited to your customers. Your web analytics is all wired up. Message points, calls to action – your store is ready to go. But then why isn't your phone ringing and your door swinging? Is there something wrong with your pitch? Your price?

We'll get into some specifics about things that will help engage and convert customers in a moment, but one thing that is often over looked is to good old fashioned user testing. Have you ever read the same sentence 10 times and were sure that everything was spelled correctly? I know I have. How many times have you sat down with your purchase path and successfully completed it without any problem? It's easy, right? So why don't my customers get it? While Web Analytics can tell you 'what' happened, it will never be able to tell you 'why'.

There simply is no replacement for good customer feedback. This is where usability testing comes in. If you can get customers to point out problems that matter to them, not just ones you imagine are priorities; you can often make a substantial impact to conversion rate. With the number of new devices, operating systems and browsers available to connect customers to the internet and your business, this challenge is only becoming more paramount. There are several online solutions today to conduct usability test. For simple tests, feel free to try this at home. If you need help setting up a user panel, gathering and analyzing results and developing an explicit plan to drive conversion rate - Explore Consulting has got you covered.

- 3. Engage Customers With Your Catalog:** Wanting to sell your products and actually doing so continues to be one of the greatest challenges for any online e-commerce business. Customer's expectations are only increasing and so are their choices for where and how to shop. This is where online merchandising comes in.

Keep your category and product pages as uncluttered as possible. Think about how best to order the products on your category page. Try to limit the number of choices to a reasonable number and put your best products above the fold. Make sure you put your price and any discounts out front. Don't make customers hunt for them.

It's all about creating trust and making it simple. To this end, take the time to create simple concise, unique product descriptions. Don't try to save time by copying from some other web page. Put your entire website through a spelling, grammar and duplicate content check. Create and make use of your own product images – avoid stock photography for product images at all costs. If relevant, consider using images with real people using your product.

Consider implementing product ratings and reviews. Customers expect this today. If you have product news, show it. For instance if something is coming soon, new or nearly out of stock, let customers know now.

Most importantly, make sure to message your unique selling proposition. Remember, customers could just as easily purchase the same product or a similar product elsewhere. If you want them to purchase from you, you have to tell them why. Perhaps you have a low price guarantee or you offer free shipping or returns. Maybe you offer up hard to find or high quality products. Whatever the case may be, give them a reason to believe. Don't skip out creating a full experience for mobile shoppers.

- 4. Service Your Customer Online:** Customers often have questions about your products. Even with the best written product descriptions and photos, it's impossible to conceive of every question your customers might ask.

Your first line of defense should be to make sure your company (preferably toll-free) phone number, is easily visible to all customers all the time. Don't make them hunt for how to contact you.

If you have a multiple locations, make sure you provide your website visitors with a store finder. Provide address, contact details and store hours at a minimum. Make sure to update these for holidays. Ideally, display inventory levels at each store.

You should also always give customers an easy way to contact you via email. Many people are just more comfortable not talking to a stranger. If you are a larger business with multiple departments, consider providing several clearly defined addresses so that customers don't waste time being routed from one person to another.

Consider creating a searchable FAQ. If one customer has a question about your products or service, how much do you want to bet that others will also? Gather together your call center notes (or call recordings if you are particularly advanced) and customer emails and turn the answers to questions into content that allows your future customers to self-service. And don't forget to make your FAQ searchable.

If you are really trying to engage your customer, consider a non-obtrusive, on-demand online chat function and/or a monitored customer forum. New technology solutions are making these easier to implement and it can often be a faster way to solve customer problems than having them call directly.

- 5. Create An Enjoyable Browsing/Buying Experience:** In this day and age, you would have thought having clear, uncluttered navigation would be a must. And it is. Yet how many websites still have 3 or 4 or more different forms of navigation on them. If you are Amazon or eBay, you might be able to get away with this. Even these websites have cleaned up their navigation recently. For everyone else, this requirement is now a must. Remember that the ratio of thumbs to point and clicks continues to grow, so make sure your site navigation works well on mobile, not just desktop.

What is also a must is website search that works. Online users have come to expect that they can go to a search bar and just type in what they want and have it found for them. This isn't just Google or Amazon or eBay anymore. It's everywhere. If your store can't bring back a results page of products that a customer is seeking, they often will just go back to a search engine and find someone else who can.

There are lots of advanced ideas you can try like embedding video into your pages or enhanced image zoom, make sure you get the basics right before moving forward with other actions.

- 6. Move Beyond Up/Cross-Sell With Curated Bundles & Collections:** As websites possessed the ability to gather more and more data, the process of up-sell and cross-sell are far more prevalent. If you've attended a few retail conferences – and believe us we have – you may have come across the business case about diapers and beer. To cut to the chase, many grocery and convenience stores have discovered that people often purchase some really odd combinations together. The challenge this creates of course is in developing a data-driven up-sell and cross-sell algorithm, particularly with products that are not purchased in high volumes. The lack of statistical significance can create some really weird combinations. Worse yet, these combinations rarely formed the recipes that encouraged other subsequent users to add more products to their shopping cart.

Today, the better answer to this is to move away from machine created combinations to curated bundles. Whether it's a skilled internal merchandiser, an advocate-shopper-customer or a recognizable expert, curated bundles tap directly into our 'me-too' complex. Computers are great at helping you find out what other people have purchased, but at the end of the day, the last time I checked, computers rarely have to use (or wear) the disastrous product combinations someone might have chosen because they made a very 'unique' purchase.

Expert curated bundles and combinations solve this problem by making sure that relevant products are associated with each other. The best benefits are that you can create packages that are unique from other retailers which in turn can drive AOV. You can also ensure that those responsible for selling are actually thinking about the offers they are making. Expert curated bundles are also a great way of engaging an audience by associating your products with a particular expert's audience, whether the expert is home grown or a celebrity.

- 7. Create a Cash Register That Works:** I can't stress this enough. Make sure your cart works. Period. If you don't have automated tools to test your purchase path, make a point to actively test and retest your cart consistently. Make sure to use a wide range of different devices and browsers. While web analytics can help you find something that breaks, it is often possible to miss an on-going or intermittent issue that is buried within your analytics. *Explore Consulting can provide an on-going test service to help ensure your commerce works.*

Make sure that your cart allows for guest transactions. Don't get me wrong, registered users are great. However forcing new customers to slow down and complete a registration form often leads to less loyalty and fewer conversions. Want consumers to sign up to receive special offers, be my guest, make them register. Forcing friction points between cart and cash register however is generally a bad idea.

When you use forms, make sure you keep your fields to a minimum. Ask yourself, would you give up this information to someone if you were asked? Consider using form validation wherever possible, particularly for contact details. One final cart must – always display your payment and trustmark icons up front – both inside and outside the cart.

- 8. A Store With No Customers Is Just A Warehouse:** So far, we've been focusing on conversion. However, without any customers, you probably won't be in business very long. This means you need to attract buyers to your store. There are many ways to go about customer acquisition and what tactics you use depends heavily on your go to market strategy. Are you selling directly, are you white labeling or are you using others to sell your product. No matter what your approach, for most online properties the three most prevalent methods of getting new traffic to your products are by establishing a brand presence (often called direct traffic) and through paid and organic search. For many, this often means Google and to a lesser extent Bing and Yahoo. While these certainly are going to be important to a fully developed search strategy, for Ecommerce you can't forget about Amazon search which often is equal if not more important. Apple is also shaking up the search market as it has recently contracted with Microsoft to surface web search through Spotlight, the built in search function in every iOS device using a completely new process.

While organic and paid search both live in the same space, they follow very different rules. PPC is generally far better understood than Google organic search. Its rules are less complicated and while the full algorithm has never been disclosed, many have poked and prodded enough to understand how PPC behaves. This doesn't mean that PPC is easy. To this day, you will hear arguments about bidding for brand terms or not, the value of long-tail, the importance of account structure, match types, bid

adjustments and whole series of other factors. Don't let PPC efforts become your marketing budgets proverbial roulette wheel. Buying traffic can often be a great way to bring new users to your website. You can gain instant insights that proxy organic search helping you target specific keywords and phrases. My advice is either be very sure of what you are doing or hire an expert – and give them clear direction on your goals and budgets.

Organic search – which some call “free” traffic is nothing of the sort. Google and Bing have very complicated algorithms. Excellence in organic search requires technical know-how, an understanding of promotion and fundamentally the creation of remarkable content. It is no longer sufficient to just have great products. Now you need to get others engaged with your catalog and your brand. And unlike PPC, the world of organic search changes rapidly. The number of major algorithm changes has only increased over the past few years. Some of the changes have made or broken entire websites. Even so, most businesses typically find that organic traffic is the best converting of all their channels – so it's well worth the effort. You simply can't afford to not be found in organic search. If you are thinking about migrating platforms or don't understand what an organic search campaign is, again, do your homework or seek out expert help from our consulting staff.

- 9. Don't Give Up Prospects Easily:** Display advertising has a lot of appeal. It seems pretty straight forward. You control creative. You either negotiate for a fixed cost for a fixed number of impressions or pay per click. You get your message spread all over the internet.

But display advertising is not for the faint of heart. First of all, display advertising is generally interruptive, even when served contextually. Most people ignore the ads, even when they are forced to watch. Second, unless you are using a third party ad server, you probably don't know when your ads were shown or whom they were shown to. Were the ads rendered above the fold where they could be seen or not? Were they rendered to one of the many online 'bots' or to a consumer using an ad blocker? How many times will someone see your ad? Once? Ten times? One hundred times? Sometimes you never know.

Unlike search, paid or organic, click through rates are generally below 0.5% or 1 click per 200 impressions. Much lower performance is not uncommon. Display advertising also tends to have very high bounce rates. Display advertising is NOT a direct response medium. The safe way to go into display advertising is to assume that you won't see a single direct conversion. It has its place, but in generating awareness, not sales and it needs to be part of a longer audience building strategy.

This being said, ad retargeting can be a great way to get into display advertising. Unlike direct or programmatic network buys, ad retargeting can be trained to only target very specific individuals who have demonstrated some high engagement with your business. This could be through retargeting individual who visited your category or specific product pages and had dwell times over some time frame, it could be individuals who abandoned your shopping cart. Today you can even retarget individuals who opened but did not click your email or who made a Google or Bing search for which you ad appeared but the user clicked on a competing ad. By focusing on these very specific audiences with tight messaging and specific offers, you can often see incredible results from prospective buyers who might be comparison shopping or perhaps weren't quite ready to purchase without a unique discount.

- 10. Customer Loyalty Is Earned, Not Burned:** Email marketing is the oldest form of digital advertising. In fact, it pre-dates the internet. Social on the other hand is generally considered the newest mass market channel. Yet in many cases, most Ecommerce providers rarely do more than spray and pray.

Think about it. You go to all the trouble to get customers to register or perhaps follow or like you. And after all that hard effort, what do you do? You send them the same offer that everyone else who visits your website or social page gets. You know more about these prospects than anyone else who visits your website, yet many companies will spend more time focused on changing their keyword bids rather than on grooming their list, managing their messaging and targeting their offers. Week after week, month after month Ecommerce companies will send the same email to their entire list, treating their oldest customers, their high value purchasers and their casual registrants all the same. What does this get them? Low open rates and single digit click through. Yet, those that do manage to fight their way through the general irrelevance often convert at a much higher rate than any other channel. This should be a sign that there is a gold mine to be had.

The first rule to email is to segment your customers. Customer nurturing, particularly when it is based on past behavior can earn you big rewards. It is not inconceivable that you can achieve greater than a full order of magnitude increase in your response rate and substantially better purchase rates and AOV. But this requires an investment. Don't be afraid to start small and work your way up. Rome wasn't built in a day. Think about crafting a welcome series for your newest registrants and customers. In time, if you really want, you can achieve email nirvana with dynamic content and tailored offers that are automated with programmatic emails.

And while the rules of social marketing are not the same, building loyalty and advocacy within this channel can also achieve results that will pay dividends over time.

11. A Web Marketers Job Is Never Done: I can't tell you how many times, sitting down with an IT team, I have heard them tell me that they want everything completely defined before they write a line of code. "We're only going to do this once." If only that were possible. Contrary to what you might have learned from Don Draper, no one gets it right with the customer all the time. Expectations change. Technology changes. When was the last time you paid attention to a door hanger or a television advertisement on broadcast TV?

As a general rule, whatever you do to succeed today will eventually see declining value. Change is just part of the process, accept it. Breathe it in. Advance your marketing by becoming a champion of testing. Feel free to start with simple A/B testing. Test your buttons, test your colors, test your product descriptions – all things that are easy to change. These are great places to start, but the real gains are made by being more aggressive. As a general rule, the smaller the change, the smaller the benefit. This is another area where the tools have become easier to use, but you will still likely need expert help to get started. One parting suggestion – always test a hypothesis. Don't test just because you can.

12. Parting Words About Your Operation: Not all of your online success can be relegated to what you do online. If you are shipping physical product, don't underestimate how important it is that you meet the expectations that you set online. If you say something will be delivered in 5 days, mean it. If it's going to take two weeks, be forthright. Customers are more than willing to accept limitations of your operation if you are upfront with them.

Also, don't pass by the opportunity to tie your physical product back to your online business. For instance, consider special packaging for a first time customer. Think about providing a term-limited post-sale registration offer for customer who checked out as guests. Don't be shy about asking for product ratings and reviews in exchange for unique offers or early sale notifications – all online. The boundary between online and offline will only become more blurred in the next few years.

We here at Explore Consulting recognize that you are the expert at your business. You will always know far more about your products than anyone else. Working together, our goal is to apply our years of Ecommerce focused services to help you succeed. Give us a call today.

Client Testimonials

EmersonMade

"We were previously using a multitude of systems to accomplish all of the functions that NetSuite now handles in one seamless system. We chose Explore Consulting because of their excellent reputation as a NetSuite consulting firm and strong background driving Ecommerce success for their clients. We have been very happy with their ability to expand the native functionality of the system, their responsiveness, knowledge and professionalism. We wouldn't hesitate to recommend Explore."

– Tim Andrews, Operations Manager

The Madden Corp.

"After doing much research on eCommerce options and qualified consulting firms, we decided to work with Explore Consulting. We need their expertise on best-practices on website development and marketing strategies. Thus, they have done a wonderful job in these areas and have been on top of all matters in keeping the project on target with our overall eCommerce timelines and marketing objectives. Good job!"

– Lloyd Uyeda, SV

About Explore Consulting

Based in Bellevue, Washington, Explore Consulting was founded in 2001 and is a professional services company dedicated to providing innovative and cost-effective solutions for their customers' database and IT systems needs. Having specialized in SaaS solutions for more than 13 years, Explore Consulting is the largest and most experienced NetSuite reseller and solution provider in the Northwestern United States. Not only is Explore a licensed reseller of the NetSuite product suite, but an experienced NetSuite implementation and integration partner. Whether you are looking for assistance with your NetSuite purchase and implementation or needing to integrate your NetSuite account to any external data source with our industry-leading CloudConnect™ service, we are your

one stop NetSuite service provider. Explore Consulting is well-known as a leader in NetSuite customization, integration and extensibility. While NetSuite can run most businesses using out-of-the-box functionality, we're experts on adapting the product to meet your specific business requirements. Explore Consulting was recently included on the Inc. 5000 list of fastest growing privately owned companies in the U.S. for the fourth year in a row as well as the Puget Sound Business Journal's 100 Fastest Growing Private Companies. Explore has also been a 5-time NetSuite 5 Star Performer and is well recognized as a leader in integration solutions for NetSuite. For more information, visit www.exploreconsulting.com.