

Introduction

Search engine optimization techniques vary based on a company's E-business model, such as lead-generation, ecommerce, membership and affiliate. In this short guide we'll cover best practices for earning and sustaining organic and paid traffic through **ecommerce search engine optimization** and marketing.

Choosing a Platform

The internet is littered with content management systems that claim to be the best at everything; that is until you load your products into it and discover that you now have to choose between user experience and marketing. As it turns out, very few content management systems actually include both.

Open Source versus Hosted Solutions

Coming from a webmaster background, it's easy to appreciate the value of **open source software** that you can customize however you like. Well, that is until the product comes out with an update that could potentially overwrite all that great customization that your former webmaster who installed it wrote with his/her own messy logic.

Maintenance

Additionally, when changes and updates are required, your programmer is likely to charge between \$75 to \$150 per hour each time you need something changed for the life of your website. And because you are not a programmer, you'll have no idea what the actual time spent on an update really was.

One last point on open source, or "do it yourself ecommerce": when search engine algorithms change or product data feed requirements change, you will be paying out of pocket to have a developer learn the change, learn the fix and deploy the patch.

Hosted Solutions

Ecommerce systems that are hosted typically come with support, free upgrades, and centralized costs. However, they don't necessarily come with the freedom that open source software allows for.

In general, the bigger the software, the more difficult it is for the developer to make changes. Larger software firms such as Magento and Volusion cannot make fast adjustments to their system when the search engines make changes, allowing a business's competitors to fly past them if their solution is smaller and more elastic.

With that in mind, smaller and more elastic solutions, such as SEO-Cart.com, have some incredible advantages. For starters, you're not going to pay for a system upgrade each time search engines change (and they do change quite often). Additionally, **core programming is typically separate from custom programming** so that updates don't overwrite custom code and features.

We've studied the top ecommerce content management systems and have isolated several that are search engine-friendly right out of the box. In a moment, we'll break out the features that are critical for SEO if you're planning to build a custom system.

The platforms we tested in order of preference include:

1. SEO-Cart.com
 - a. Pros:
 - i. Cost (\$69/mo. to \$150/mo.)
 - ii. Incredible customer service
 - iii. Boutique firm with platform elasticity
 - iv. Everything you can imagine is included
 - v. Very lightweight and simple
 - b. Cons:
 - i. Hosted, proprietary solution

2. [Magento](#)

a. Pros:

- i. Enterprise version includes support with setup
- ii. Community version is free

b. Cons:

- i. Cost: Enterprise costs around \$15,000 per year
- ii. Enterprise is big, heavy and requires quite a bit of training
- iii. Community version requires dozens of extensions that don't all play well together
- iv. Community version requires special hosting and support
- v. Community version requires greater than \$15,000 worth of consultant and webmaster support to mimic the enterprise version.

3. [CS-Cart.com](#)

a. Pros:

- i. Mostly search engine-friendly out of the box
- ii. Offers free and enterprise editions
- iii. Cost: about \$1k for a developer version
- iv. Open source code on free version

b. Cons:

- i. Support costs are purchased in "credits" for a reason

4. Other "SEO-Friendly" Carts (briefly reviewed online – use at your own risk)

- a. Volusion
- b. Shopping Cart Elite
- c. Avactis Shopping Cart
- d. ProductCart

Ecommerce Cart Requirements

So you've decided that despite the ongoing maintenance and programmer costs, that you'd like to build your own solution, either starting with an open source cart or building completing from scratch?

We don't understand why exactly you'd want to reinvent the wheel, but if you do, here are the requirements we've assembled to insure that your cart is both search engine-friendly and build with options that make it optimized for higher placement within search engine results.

Website-Level Criteria (SEO-Only)

1. **Compatibility with WordPress** (a critical industry-standard marketing tool)

- ☐ Can recent blog posts be easily added to the homepage?
- ☐ Can hosting both solutions be on the same server or does a business have to pay for separate hosting?
- ☐ Deploying theme changes should be seamless between the cart and WordPress installation

2. **Website Performance & Other Features**

- ☐ Works seamlessly with a content delivery network, such as [MaxCDN](#)?
 - ✓ Test with <http://www.webpagetest.org/> (look for an **X** or ✓)
- ☐ Passes HTML5 & CSS3 validation with flying colors
 - ✓ Test HTML5 with <http://validator.w3.org/>
 - ✓ Test CSS with <http://jigsaw.w3.org/css-validator/>
- ☐ Includes a "tap-friendly" mobile version
 - ✓ View on iOS or Android: [Bob's Watches](#), [Zappos](#), & [JC Penny](#)
 - ✓ Test with <http://www.howtogomo.com/>

- ☐ Passes Google's speed test (post-CDN deployment is fine)
 - ✓ Test: <https://developers.google.com/speed/pagespeed/insights>
- ☐ User-friendly custom 404 error page
 - ✓ Same design as the rest of the website
 - ✓ Large search box to assist the user in finding something specific
 - ✓ Links to popular products below search box
- ☐ Automatic redirects & out-of-stock messages
 - ✓ When a product is deleted permanently, a 301 redirect from the page to the category is automatically deployed
 - ✓ When a product is removed that MAY be added back later, a 302 redirect to the category is deployed
 - ✓ Out of stock product page stays up, but pulls users visually into viewing similar products or best match without thinking required
- ☐ XML sitemap is generated and submitted to Google, Yahoo!, & Ask automatically and daily
 - ✓ Sitemaps should include images, pages, videos & blog posts
- ☐ HTML sitemap is generated dynamically from published content and is easy to use for a visitor
 - ✓ Product names and page names are used as anchor text
- ☐ Links to homepage are the root URL and never index.ext or default.ext
- ☐ All URLs are search engine-friendly
 - ✓ Good: /category-name/product-name/
 - ✓ Bad: site.com/?cat=13545&pID=54636
- ☐ When additional attributes are added to page URLs, a canonical tag exists to let the search engines know to only index the main URL
 - ✓ Example: /shoes/girls/?print=1
 - ✓ Contains: <link rel="canonical" href="/shoes/girls/" />

- ☐ Easily integrates with Google Analytics
 - ✓ Including all the special cross-domain options & referral tracking
 - ✓ Ref: <https://developers.google.com/analytics/devguides/collection/gajs/gaTrackingSite>
 - ✓ Including adding tracking codes to /order-completion/ page
 - ✓ **Especially Ecommerce tracking**
 1. <https://developers.google.com/analytics/devguides/collection/gajs/gaTrackingEcommerce>
- ☐ Automatically redirects the non-www to www version via 301
- ☐ Robots.txt can be updated from the administrative area but offers defaults
 - ✓ Disallows admin section
 - ✓ Includes XML sitemap paths
 - ✓ Handles mobile subdomains for various web crawlers
- ☐ Dynamic site-wide titles, meta descriptions, and meta keywords are customizable
- ☐ Top-most navigation on homepage-only is complete with dropdown menus to relevant categories and subcategories
- ☐ Top-most navigation on subpages does NOT include dropdown menus
 - ✓ Example: <http://www.zappos.com/> (view home & category pages)
- ☐ Theme features ALT and image height/width attributes inclusively
- ☐ System automatically detects and alerts admin when broken links are found
- ☐ Breadcrumb navigation is part of the category, subcategory, product detail and blog post pages
 - ✓ Ref: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breadcrumb_\(navigation\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Breadcrumb_(navigation))
- ☐ Social media integration
 - ✓ Visitors can “Like”, “+1” and “Add to Circles” without leaving
 - ✓ Integration is not distraction, but is easy to find (not in footer)
 - ✓ Twitter stream is visible and ever-scrolling (3-4 posts max)

Webpage-Level Criteria (SEO-Only)

- ☐ Homepage title, meta description and meta keywords tags are editable
 - ✓ The site title should NOT be forced by the CMS if custom attributes exist
- ☐ Category & subcategory pages
 - ✓ Admin create additional content “above products” **or** “below products”
 - ✓ Main heading (h1 - Product Name), title and meta data are customizable
 - ✓ If video exists for the category, it’s placed esthetically within the addition content for the category
 - ✓ Products listed on the category page emulate Google Shopping with regards to layout, spacing, DHTML features, etc
 - ✓ Left navigation is specific to the category page
 - ✓ Size and color options and by price and ratings
 - ✓ Trust signals exist (Authorize.net, SSL, etc)
 - ✓ Newsletter signup form
- ☐ Product detail pages
 - ✓ Main heading (h1 - Product Name), title and meta data are customizable
 - ✓ Page is full width (no sidebar to distract the purchase process)
 - ✓ Product image can be zoomed in on or be 3-dimensional
 - ✓ Add to Cart button should stand out
 - ✓ Social media integration
 - ✓ Users should be able to quickly “Pin” an image on Pinterest
 - ✓ Like and +1 buttons do not force the user to leave the page
 - ✓ Ratings and review feature use RDFa micro-formats
 - ✓ Product details are wrapped in Schema.org/Product micro-formats
 - ✓ Good examples: [Bob’s Watches](#), [Zappos](#), & [Walmart](#)

Product Data Feed Criteria (Pay-Per-Click & Free Shopping Engines)

This topic deserves some explaining and will likely have its own guide if we can figure out a way to make it dynamic and ever-changes the way comparison shopping engines are by nature.

Resources to learn about comparison shopping engines are listed below:

1. Channel Advisor: [CSE Strategies](#), [Amazon Strategies](#), [eBay Strategies](#), etc
2. CPC Strategy's [Top 10 Comparison Shopping Engines Compared](#)

In a nutshell, each engine requires a special data feed (list of products with columns for attributes) that **an Ecommerce solution should generate automatically with SEO best practices in mind**, to insure the highest placement possible.

In our opinion, the most important is Google Shopping, since [the May 2012 announcement](#), product listing ads are now a permanent part of Google search results. As with most shopping engines, price is typically key to top placement, but there are other techniques that can improve ranking as well, the **Trusted Store badge** being one of them. Below are a few other articles that describe optimization in mind.

Google Shopping Optimization Resources

1. Google+ Hangout [recording on feed optimization](#)
2. Practical Ecommerce ["5 Google Shopping Optimization Tips"](#)
3. GoDataFeed's [10 Tips on Optimizing Your Google Product Feed](#)

The top takeaways from these and other resources start at the Trusted Store badge, but also include having high quality images that scale well, positive merchant reviews, having accurate manufacturer part numbers, including shipping and tax in data feeds, frequent submissions, accurate Google Product categories, short descriptive product titles and descriptions, and using the Google "Publish" label.

Thanks for Reading!

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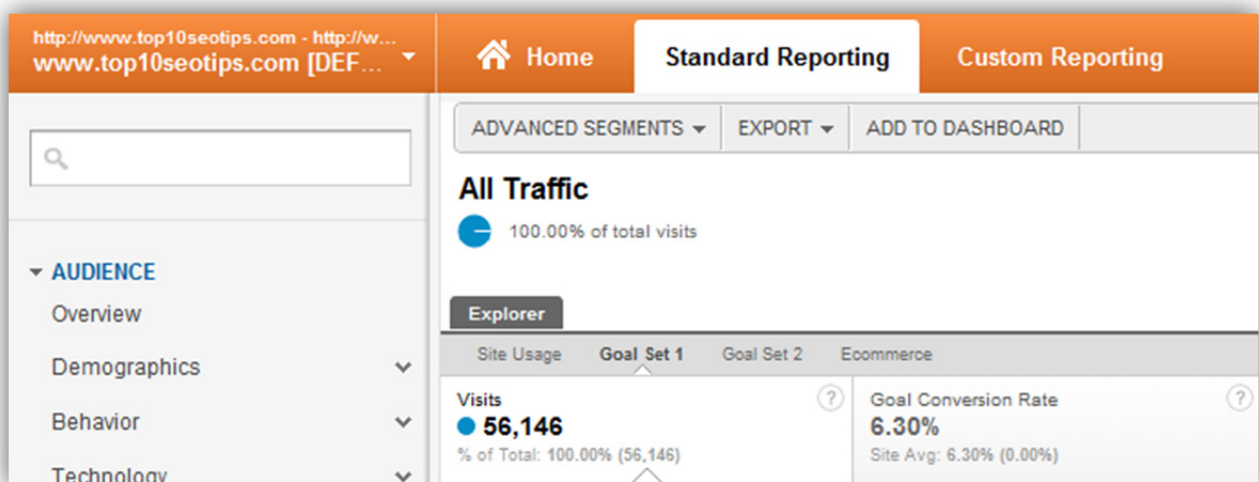
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