

Webinar Q&A

Outgrowing your Webstore? Should you Redesign or Replatform?

Below you will find answers to questions that were submitted before and during the November 17th 2009 webinar with ATG, FitForCommerce and Diane von Furstenberg. You can view a recording of the webinar by visiting <http://www.atg.com/en/company/news/webinars/>. We thank Bernardine Wu, CEO and Founder of FitForCommerce for providing these answers.

What are the challenges of developing your own platform from scratch?

The challenges are many: hiring the right people, managing and growing them as employees, keeping abreast of new trends and technologies; knowing the best practices, and overcoming the proverbial bus ('what if he gets hit by a bus') by having a back-up plan or depth on the team etc. and the cost of developing and maintaining the platform. Benefits are you own the whole thing and have a lot of control. That is also one of the negatives. You should understand if that 'ownership' outweighs the economies of scale and other benefits of selecting an eCommerce solution provider instead of re-inventing the wheel. If one really wants to leverage in-house development skills and resources, we recommend a hybrid approach where systems or modules or widgets are purchased and the in-house team integrates and/or customizes them, and/or builds add-on modules, especially those needing custom design and development.

What is a good roadmap to get started with eCommerce?

The best way to get started is to take things one step at a time and spend as much time on preparation as you do on implementation:

- a) Do research; see what your competitors are doing; see what you like and don't like; get a high-level idea of what types of solutions might work for you and what they might cost
- b) Understand your requirements; determine your must-haves and your nice-to-haves; set your priorities
- c) Determine which solutions might be able to do what you need within your budget (create your long list)
- d) Create a Request for Proposals and send it out to a manageable long list
- e) Evaluate the responses and narrow down the list of potential solutions
- f) Further research the providers and the solutions; see demos; do reference checks
- g) Negotiate, sign and start work

How quickly could I have a new site up and running if I choose an on demand model?

It depends on your requirements since non-standard functionality can add 50-100% to the timelines. Generally though for a standard site, on-demand platform implementations can take 3-6 months, while a custom build on licensed software can take 6-9 months. However, many projects take 9-12 months or longer for more complex requirements and integrations.

What are the best recommended platforms?

There is no such thing as a best recommended platform, because it depends on your requirements. There are many choices now, so it's all about finding the right 'fit'. What fits one ecommerce business may not fit another. That is why we emphasize the requirements and preparation stage as equally critical to the selection stage. To research ecommerce platforms, visit www.fitforcommerce.com/fitbase.

What is your opinion on open source software?

Open source software is clearly a good route for many ecommerce businesses and is growing in adoption with the availability of solid open source modules and widgets. The

key is to define requirements first, then decide whether the open source software options fit your requirements, including whether it is the right ongoing support and grown model for you. The 'pros' for using open source include: control, flexibility, low cost. The 'cons' include dependency on programmers, instability in some of the code because it may be new or untested, And while open source may seem 'free' that doesn't mean there isn't a cost to it.

What are the top shopping carts for medium sized business (\$1-3M web sales)?

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We are looking for a new platform. How do we go about evaluating the various platforms, open source vs. custom, etc. ?

Our clients follow a process called eCommerce Diligence which emphasizes requirements and research as equally important as evaluating platform choices. In the Requirements phase, here is a 10-step process to follow:

1. Align with Business Objectives
2. Define Functional Requirements in Detail
3. Know Relevant Best Practices
4. Perform Competitive Analysis
5. Prioritize and Time-Phase Requirements
6. Document Use Cases
7. Diagram Workflow Design
8. Apply Creative Design
9. Test and Adjust Requirements ...again and again
10. Keep Requirements Updated ...always

We need a comprehensive plan for choosing a new ecommerce host and switching over. We don't want to be dropped off the edge of the earth with a list of providers who claim to meet our needs. Does FitForCommerce stand behind their recommendations? How is this measured?

FitForCommerce does not just give their clients a list, when doing Requirements Diligence thru Vendor Selection. We help ecommerce businesses determine their requirements and leverage best practices; we facilitate a RFP process, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. We help kick the tires including evaluations, comparative analysis, demos and reference checks to get to a final decision. We also provide ongoing coaching to ensure that your implementation is successful and that you continue to stay on track with your objectives.

How can you qualify a web services company to be sure they are thorough and will provide long-term value?

The best way to do that is to do your own research. Check references, and not just the ones they give you. Meet the implementation team and the account management team. And understand your own requirements well enough to feel confident that they are the best fit for you.

How do you integrate the external fulfillment and payment system?

Start with a clear picture of what data you have and should have. Note the shortcomings of your data. Then diagram the required data flow from system to system. Note the shortcomings of your current data flows. These are the basis for your requirements, but make sure you are clear on what is an issue with data (e.g. quality, quantity) versus an issue with interfaces between systems. Understanding your requirements from a data

perspective (as opposed to just a system to system integration) is a better way to drive integration requirements and implementation. If you are working with a vendor or third-party integrator, they may have processes or documentation if they have done the same or a similar integration. With fulfillment and payment systems, it's especially important to involve the stakeholders and users of those systems so that their needs are considered.

Will you talk about how companies integrate different business units (with different business processes and different software applications) into one customer-facing shopping cart? We are struggling with this now and would appreciate any ideas. It raises both front- and back-office issues, but I'm most concerned with how we present to customers and potential customers

Yes, you're right, it does raise both front and back office issues. And there is no simple answer to doing this, other than rolling up sleeves and diving into the data, functional requirements, and customer experience objectives. Collect these requirements for each business unit, making sure you are involving all the stakeholders and capturing all requirements. Then develop the holistic approach solving for each requirement, exploring ways of satisfying multiple requirements. If there are conflicting requirements and an optimal solution isn't apparent, then you may need to arbitrate or find compromises. Perhaps there is a work-around (hopefully temporary) that can be used. When working amongst multiple business units, it is often as much a people and process challenge as it is a technical challenge.

What are the issues around redeployment and how to minimize disruption/how to effectively plan for migration name a few preferred shopping carts?

The issues are many: when to re-platform, how to spend the time needed while still doing your 'day job'; how to really understand what you need; how to find the best-fit solution, how to execute on budget/on schedule, etc. The best way to minimize the issues IS to effectively plan. Have a strong project manager responsible for this effort, ensure that all the stakeholders are committed; prioritize your requirements; have an agreed project plan that is followed and adjusted if needed; and raise flags immediately so you can take action to mitigate any problems.

How can I improve my checkout process?

Improving checkout is at the heart of an ecommerce business and usually the greatest lever – of success or failure. The checkout process first needs to be studied to find the leaks. Use as much hard data (e.g. funnel analysis, error logs, customer service reports, customer survey results) as possible to identify real issues and causes. Then review checkout for other design and usability opportunities, whether they are correcting issues or making improvements or introducing new features. Consult with a specialist for a fresh eye – on both your analytics and usability. Testing is important but often hard to do with checkout, but plan A/B tests as much as you can. We've done usability and eye tracking studies which have helped find trouble spots that could not be identified in analytics, I would highly recommend this.

Do you focus more on the back end of your ecommerce solution or a glitzy front end?

Sadly, this cannot be an "either/or" approach. A "glitzy" front end with bad data, bad fulfillment, bad customer service will hurt your business. A good back-end but with no business coming in – not that useful. You need to analyze your entire business, figure out what you need to do, and then prioritize your work. Maybe there are some small and quick changes you can make to your front end while you're addressing a major fulfillment issue. Maybe you can make small improvements in your customer service process while you re-design your site. Or maybe stop-gap fixes are not the answer and you need to replatform. You can only know the answer by doing your homework.

Which one will increase conversion rate Site re-design or a new platform?

Both site re-designs and re-platforms can increase conversion rates dramatically. Also, mini-redesigns or tweaks can increase conversion rates. The important first step is to assess your current site for weaknesses and opportunities using as much hard data (e.g. funnel analysis, error logs, customer service reports, customer survey results) as possible to identify real issues and causes. Then review the site for other design and usability opportunities, whether they are correcting issues or making improvements or introducing new features. Consult with a specialist for a fresh eye. Then once you know your full list of issues and to-do's, you can evaluate whether a re-design is sufficient or whether re-platforming is in order. Any time your correction or desired state cannot be met by the current platform, take note of it because often there is a tipping point where the amount of limitations in a current platform drives the decision to re-platform.

What are consumer turn-ons and turn-offs; and big eCommerce mistakes made by businesses?

Your customers' biggest turn-on is to be able to find what they need easily and quickly, clearly understand what it is, how much it will cost them and when they can get it. And to be able to easily address any problems they might have with the product or service. Their biggest turn-off would be the opposite of that! Imagine walking into a retail store and having someone insist on getting your email address before you can get in the check-out line (a.k.a. required registration); that would piss you off probably! The biggest eCommerce mistakes made by businesses is to forget that! Let the customer guide you in every eCommerce decision you make.

Is there anything in particular that a non-profit company should look into when determining whether we should redesign or replatform? We are an environmental nonprofit in the San Francisco Bay Area, and we just did a replatform for the main site. We held back from moving the store because it would have been taking 10 steps back. I want to improve the store but remain connected to the rest of our current main site. We produce many of our own items and have physical stores, each with a different focus. For more information to answer the question, please take a look at www.parksconservancy.org?

Whether you are a non-profit, for-profit, educational, B2B or B2C, international, drop-ship, etc. ecommerce business, all the same principles apply. Your requirements will lead you down the right path. If you meant that re-platforming is 'taking 10 steps back' because of the time, effort and cost of re-platforming, then those are considerations in weighing the ROI. Re-platforming should mean many steps forward on balance. For an expert opinion of your site, you might want to avail yourself of the discount offer for a Rapid Site Eval from FFC. Contact us at sales@fitforcommerce.com.