

eCommerce: Beyond the Front-End

How to Develop an eCommerce
Website Focused on the End-to-End
Customer Experience

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Introduction

When it comes to eCommerce websites, beauty is all too often only skin deep.

You don't have to look too hard to find examples of beautiful front-end sites that are let down by gaps in the buyer journey. The bottom line is, it's pointless and costly to implement an award-winning front-end design if the customer experience behind it is left wanting.

Good eCommerce website design is much more than just how the site looks. It considers how every step of the user journey flows into the next, and ensures the customer can complete their purchase in a swift and seamless fashion.

The 'abandoned cart' is something that every eCommerce business wants to minimise, if not avoid completely - where an online shopping journey has become so frustrating, confusing or uncertain, that the consumer has given up on their purchase long before checkout. No matter how good the site looks, it will never be enough to save a poorly designed path to purchase.

In this guide, we'll look at how you can build an eCommerce website with the right blend of style and substance. A site that doesn't just look smart, but delivers an engaging, effortless and responsive buying experience for the user - encouraging satisfied shoppers to return through your virtual doors time and time again.

We'll look at the fundamentals of good user experience design, identify the importance of establishing an emotional connection with your target audience, as well as how to integrate your site with your back-end operations for maximum efficiency.

Section 01 — Design Fundamentals

First impressions are of course important for any online store, but looks aren't everything. Consider the most successful eCommerce sites, like Amazon or eBay. Their beauty is in their simplicity and ease of use, not their front-end design.

When you are designing an eCommerce site, there are a number of design fundamentals to be aware of. Understanding these elements will help you separate the designs that just look great, from those that perform well - not only in terms of generating sales, but also in providing a great overall customer experience.



Security—First

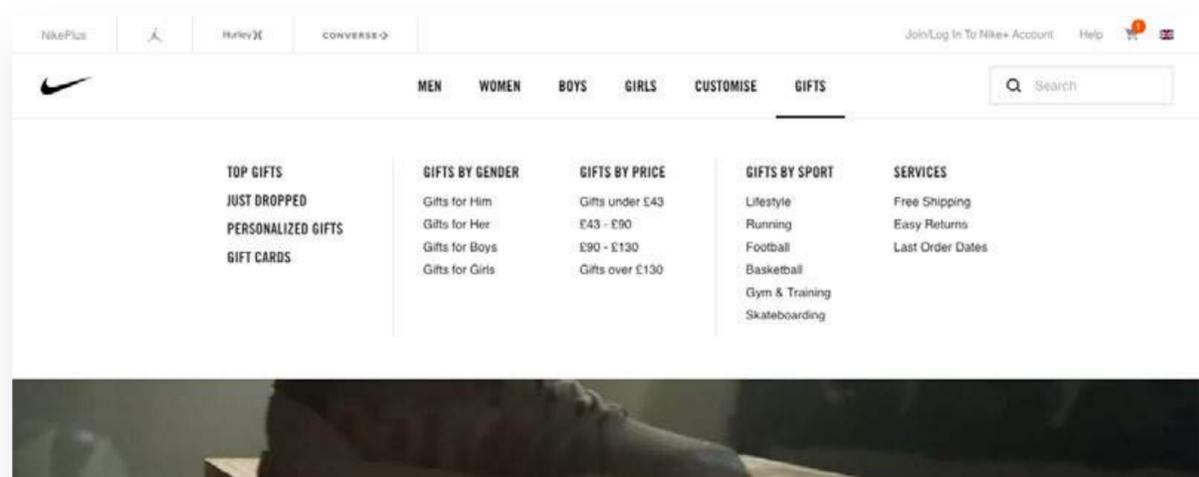
Of all the feelings you may want to evoke in your customer (*more on that in the next section*), the main one is a strong sense of security. Visitors need to trust your site enough to hand over their personal and payment details. Any sign of flakey security will mean they will leave your store in a heartbeat, likely never to return.

Effortless Navigation

Menu structures, filtering tools and navigation bars may not be the most glamorous aspects of an eCommerce website design, but they are amongst the most important. Your challenge is to move a buyer from landing page to order confirmation via the simplest possible route - and that means helping them find exactly what they're looking for, as quickly as possible.

If your product range is extensive, drop-down menus can help. Rather than present the buyer with a 'needle in a haystack' approach, introduce a simple choice of basic categories and allow them to drill down into your products step-by-step. A good search facility is essential too. For example, a 'live search' option enables customers to find the items they are looking for more quickly, literally providing results in real-time as they type. This improves the user experience significantly, leading to improved conversion rates. Furthermore, rather than a 'no results found' message, alternative categories and promotions can be provided, ensuring the buyer doesn't reach a dead end.

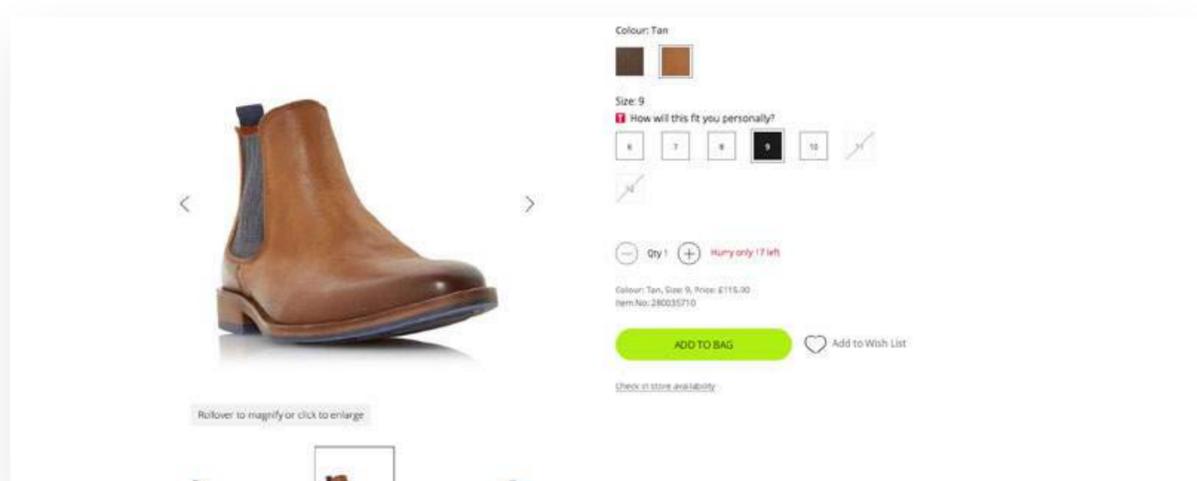
Nike: A great example of a simply, clearly structured drop down menu.



Clear Call to Actions

Clear, concise and well-positioned calls-to-action (CTAs) are vital if you're to convert browsing prospects into paying customers. Visitors should never have to scroll the screen searching for an 'add to basket' or 'buy now' button on a product page, so make sure the button is always visible on screen (*which will vary depending on device type*).

House of Fraser: Green highlights CTAs & guides users through the purchase journey.



Catering for Multiple Devices

Today, catering for multiple devices is absolutely critical. It's essential that your eCommerce site offers an elegant experience on a mobile and tablet, as well as a desktop. Increasingly, people are buying on the move, so a simplified mobile version of your site is required as a minimum. Better still, create a responsive website that automatically re-adjusts to optimise itself for the user's screen size. Testing the experience your site provides on multiple devices and browsers is a key part of your site build.

UK mobile retail eCommerce sales is looking to reach 38% in 2018.



Product Photography

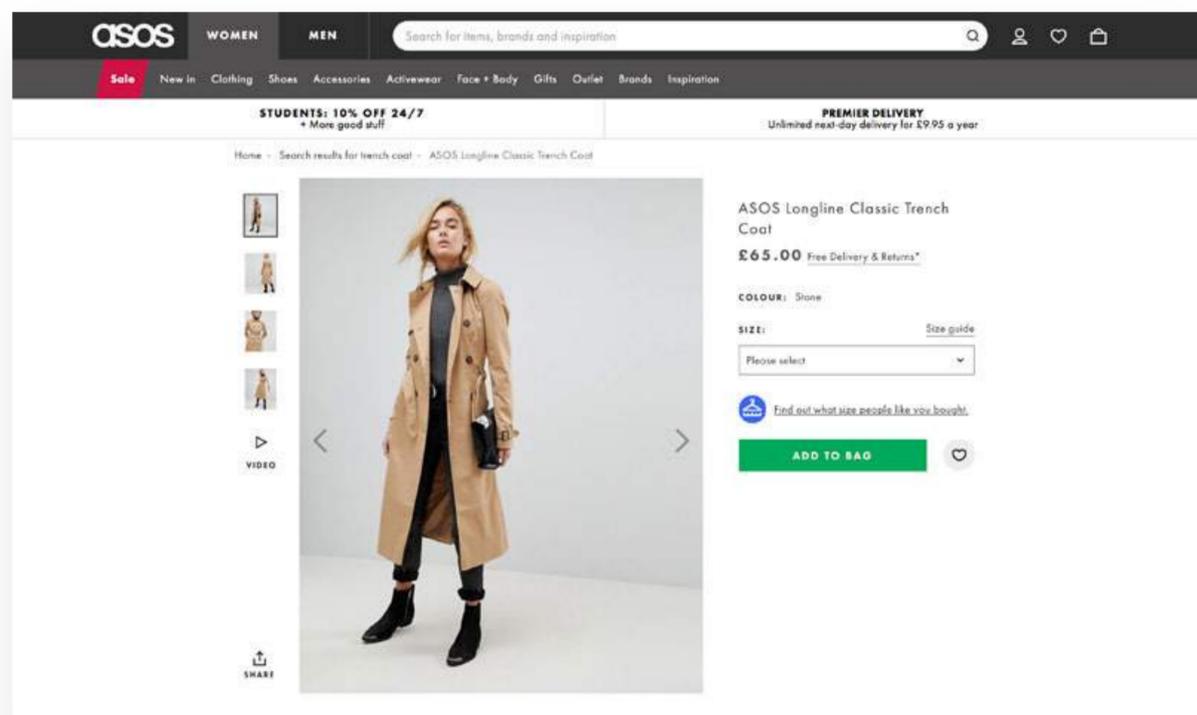
eCommerce businesses should never underestimate the importance of high quality photography to showcase products. Engaging photography sells merchandise and will boost sales.

Many of the best online stores in the world, such as Apple.com, use powerful product imagery as the central focal point for their site. Having powerful visual imagery on a website reinforces your brand and will motivate buyers to purchase your products. So, strip back your design and make your products the real heroes on your website.

ASOS

Fashion giant ASOS take the time to shoot video footage of their models wearing their products to help give a more realistic view of how they will fit.

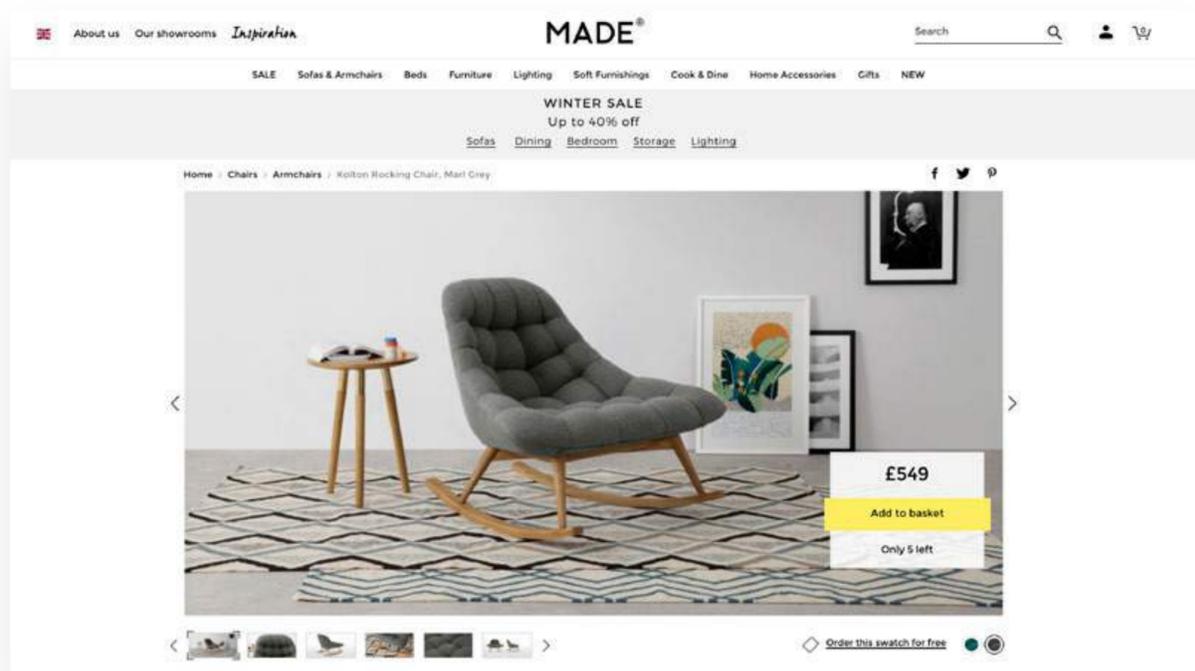
asos.com



MADE[®]

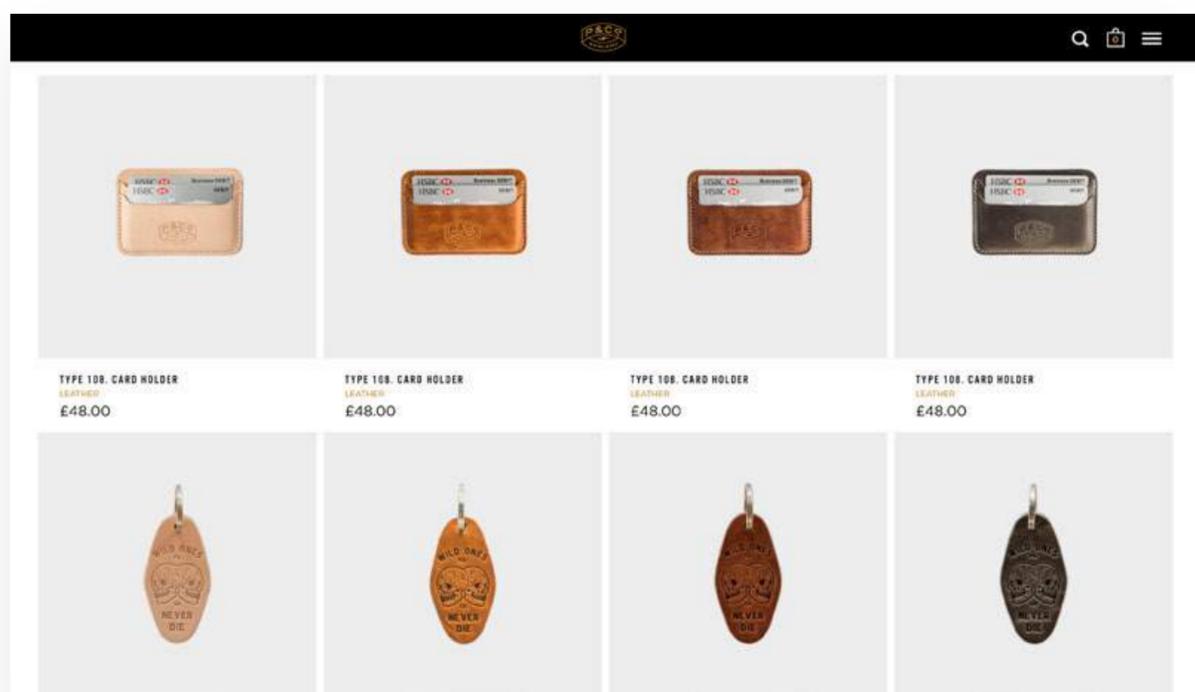
Made have great examples of how they try to sell the brands lifestyle to the customer, letting them imagine how the furniture will looking in their home whilst giving the option to view on a clean background.

made.com



The content team at Provision & Co keep product photography consistent across the Shopify powered eCommerce website.

pand.co



Fast Loading Speeds

Often overlooked, page load speeds can have a huge impact on your online sales. Today's impatient shopper will bounce from your site if pages take too long to load, so make sure large product images are compressed and rendered only when they come into view. You should also look to apply some technical components such as to enable the caching of AJAX requests, using CDN for fonts and images, as well as virtualised cloud servers - all of which can dramatically increase page loading speeds. Look into content delivery networks too, which deliver a cached version of your content from a local server.

It's not just your buyers who are looking for a fast-loading site. Google algorithms also pay attention to load speeds, and sluggish performance can see you drop down the rankings to devastating effect.

Simplified Information

While you naturally want to do justice to every product you have, information overload only serves to overwhelm the buyer. Don't attempt to showcase all your product information up front. Keep things simple by giving prominence to your top-selling items, and tuck other items away neatly under straightforward menus.

Apple: Dominant position of their latest products in the homepage hero.



Section 02 — Emotionally Engage with your Customers

While the design principles outlined in section one apply broadly to any eCommerce website, the way in which they are applied will depend on the needs of your target market.

It's essential therefore to understand your buyers' motivations, in order that you create an experience that engages them at an emotional level. In other words, why should they care more about your brand and your products, than those of your competition.

The key question to ask is not, 'What do you want buyers to do on your website?' - the answer will almost always be 'to make a purchase' - but rather, 'How do you want customers to feel?'

A tricky question perhaps, but one which underpins your entire website design. For instance, a toy and games store may want to evoke joy, excitement and playfulness in the buyer - while a technology provider selling business software wants to make customers feel an element of pain, followed by hope and then inspiration.

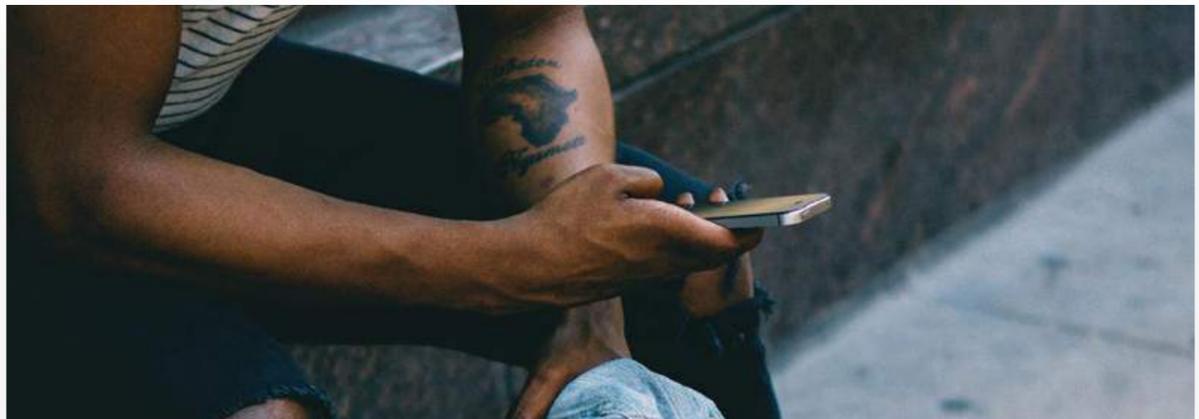
Bringing those emotions out successfully will be key to getting a purchase, and encouraging continued future custom.

Engaging New & Repeat Customers

It's important to remember that your website needs to cater for both first-time buyers and returning customers. The needs of these two types of buyers are subtly different, and therefore the way in which they engage with your website will be too.

First-time visitors might want to do their research before a transaction, heading straight to your about pages, review sections, terms and conditions, or maybe even your blog content. So, attention must be paid to these areas every bit as much as your sales-focused pages, if you're to build confidence and trust.

Around 80% of shoppers spend time researching before actually making a purchase.



At the same time, repeat visitors already comfortable with your business, will likely want to bypass this content and simply place another order. They'll expect a streamlined path, straight to the checkout.

With returning customers you also have a great opportunity to personalise their experience, with content and messaging that makes them feel special as a returning customer. More sophisticated sites will also leverage data to highlight relevant products the customer may be interested in, based on previous purchases and behavior.

Analytics, as well as methods such as A/B testing (comparing two versions of a web page against each other to determine which performs better), can be used to understand buyer behavior. A continual process of testing and analysis will ensure you optimise the journey for your different types of buyers.

Section 03 — Think Through the Whole Purchase Process

Whatever emotions you want your customers to feel when browsing your website, there are some feelings you definitely don't want to evoke.

Frustration and confusion will quickly have users heading for the exit door, so you need to make sure the shopping experience is smooth, consistent and intuitive throughout – and that doesn't end after a purchase is made.

To do that, it's vital to design the whole buying process end-to-end - looking at the end-to-end user journey and how various touchpoints can be integrated with your business's back-end operations.

If you also sell products through other channels (via phone, online marketplaces, or physical stores), it's important that the website isn't seen as an isolated sales channel, but rather as an integral part of the bigger picture.



An integrated eCommerce system would typically consist of the following components that sit behind your front-end shopping cart:

1. The Transaction Engine

The likes of Shopify, Magento and WooCommerce are eCommerce platforms that effectively power your customer's shopping experience. Each platform offers its own benefits, and you'll need to find the right solution for you.

2. Inventory Database

By integrating your transaction engine with your warehouse inventory database, you'll be able to show customers in real time whether (or how many) products are available to buy. This can remove the risk of customers placing an order, which can't be fulfilled.

3. Shipping Data

Hooking up your website front-end with your shipping database means buyers can also be given a clear expectation on shipping dates at the point of purchase, as well as email updates to keep them informed of progress.

4. Payment Provider

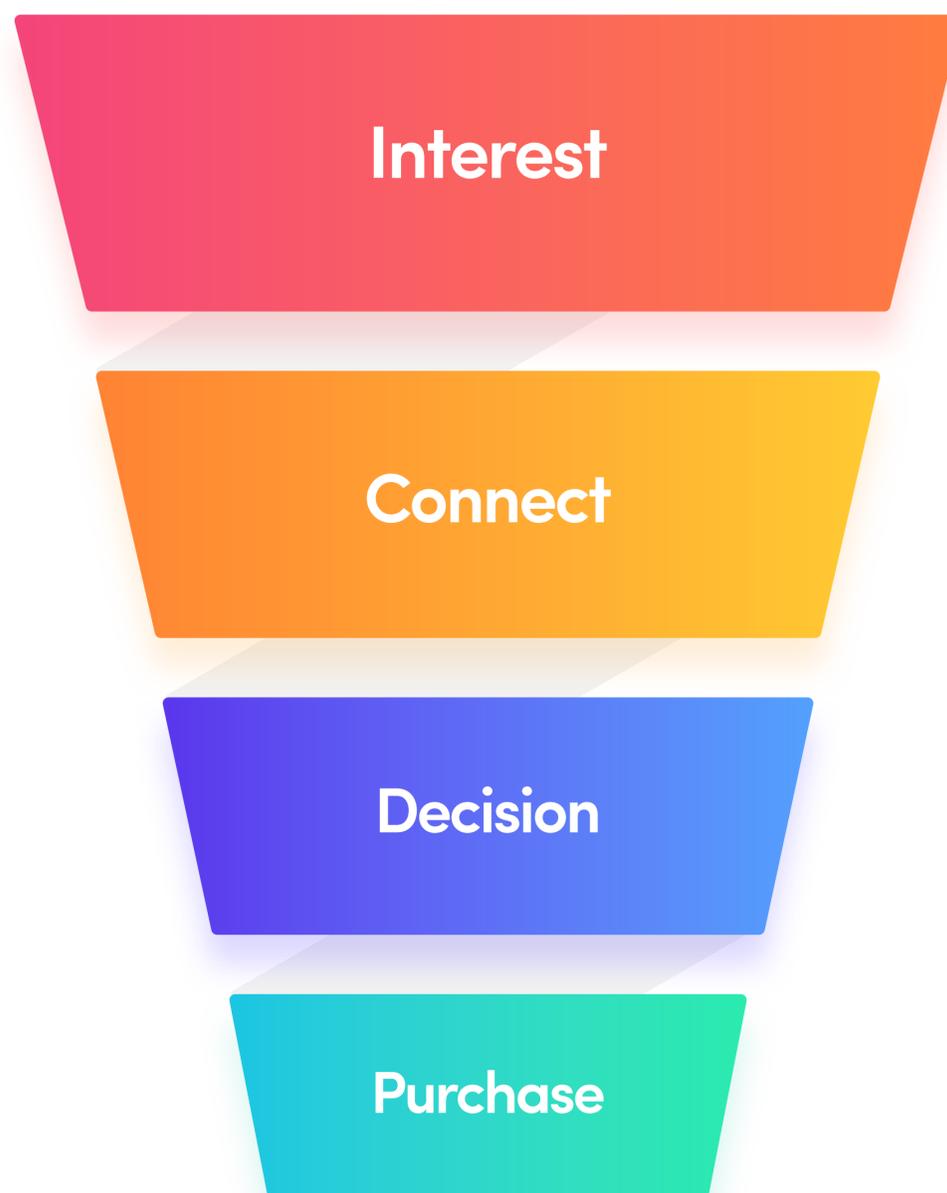
While some eCommerce engines offer their own payment processing platform, almost all integrate with third party providers. The final steps of the checkout process can vary significantly depending on the payment gateway you choose, so do your due diligence and select a solution that offers a seamless experience for users, as well as instant payment authentication.

5. Easy Returns

Giving customers peace of mind, that if an item isn't quite right, they won't have to pay return fees is another plus. Customers see repacking, trips to the post office and extra costs as one big friction point and it plays a massive part in order conversion.

Brands such as ASOS offer a free collection service when you're a premier member, meaning a delivery driver will come to your location and take the parcel back for you, all that is required is attaching the included returns label to your parcel.

A typical eCommerce purchase funnel.



Section 04 — Don't Neglect Order Fulfilment

Even when an order has been successfully placed and payment conveniently taken, the customer's shopping experience is still far from over.

However slick and streamlined your website user journey proves to be, any positive impression of your store will soon disappear if the order is not fulfilled efficiently.

The recent rise in next-day and same-day delivery services has increased customer expectations around shipping, with average eCommerce delivery times falling almost 50% in the last two years. Getting orders out promptly is therefore essential to meet expectations, but at the same time, care must be taken to avoid administrative errors such as sending incorrect items or shipping to the wrong address.

Research shows that 29% of customers would never order again from a site that sent them the wrong product, so a slip here may cost you significant future business.

92% of US customers would consider delivery within 2 days to be 'fast delivery', but only 18% would consider delivery within 5-7 days as fast



Is your Fulfilment Partner Letting you Down?

Typically, deliveries will be carried out on your behalf by a fulfilment partner – most online businesses won't build their own capability in this area until they reach a certain scale. So, how do you know when your partner is falling short?

Here are some tell-tale signs that it might be time to evaluate your fulfilment process:

1. Complaints

The most obvious sign that your fulfilment provider isn't meeting the required standards is a string of complaints from customers. Whether it's a misplaced parcel or a damaged order, every fulfilment fail could represent lost custom and negative online reviews, so only a very small number of errors can be tolerated. Complaints shouldn't peak at busy times like Christmas either - your provider should be able to handle an increase in orders.

2. Poor Communication

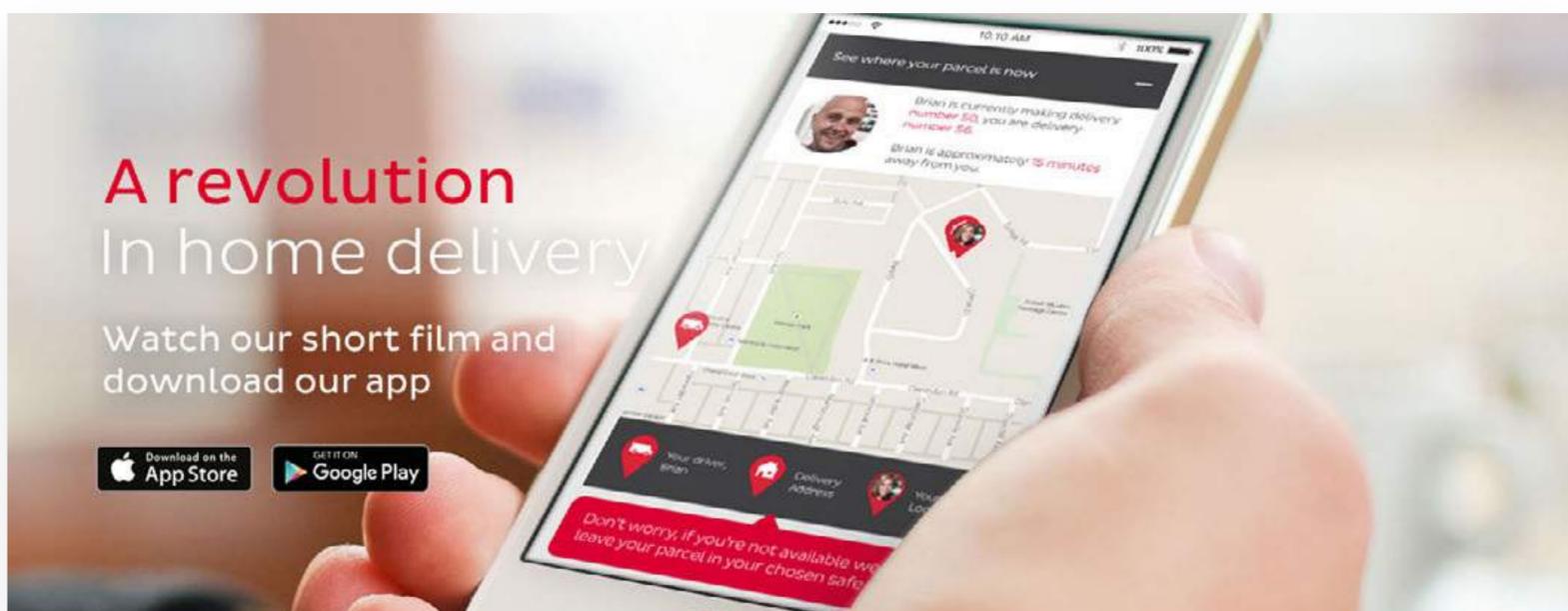
Open communication between you and your fulfilment provider is key to a smooth delivery service, but if you struggle to get in touch with them yourself, just imagine how it is for your customers trying to place a query or track an order.

Fulfilment providers will often be one of the few parties to engage with your customers by phone or in person at the door - and it's essential that they represent your brand well.



DPD are leading the way in communicating with the customers they are delivering packages too. Traditional couriers will likely email with unhelpful order statuses, often out of sync with real time events. DPD go beyond tracking emails.

Allowing the customer to see who their driver is, the estimated delivery time, their position in the delivery run and a live map of where the delivery van actually is. Offering this level customer experience can mean customers are more likely to buy through your eCommerce platform, knowing there is a reliable courier waiting at the end of the purchase process.



3. Rising Fulfilment Costs

When multiple companies sell the same product, the cost of delivery can often be a key factor in deciding who gets the sale. It's therefore important that you're able to pass on good delivery deals (free next day delivery for instance) to your customers as often as possible.

If your fulfilment costs are too high - and keep heading in the wrong direction - you simply won't have the margin to offer discounted delivery. And you may well lose sales to your competitors as a result.

In Summary

From fast-loading web pages to fulfilment provider relationships, there are many behind-the-scenes factors that contribute to eCommerce success.

First impressions will always be important, but more critical than the front-end design of your online store is the smooth and consistent customer experience. This requires seamless integration between your eCommerce store and your back-end operations.

Too many organisations treat eCommerce as a standalone, isolated sales channel, reluctant perhaps to change the way they work or to invest in integrated systems. But getting this right has huge and positive implications for a business. Conversely, in the age of the online review, a poor website experience can be extremely damaging to your brand as a whole.

So, whether you're looking to redesign your eCommerce website or you're starting from scratch, re-envisioning your customer experience and evaluating your existing business models are sensible places to begin.

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transform your
eCommerce
experience.

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