

# The holistic web

## Developing a 360° online strategy



# Online today

*“Toto, I’ve got a feeling we’re not in Kansas anymore”*

**You can say one thing about the online world with certainty - it never stands still.**

The next version is always just over the horizon. So we hone our Flash and ActionScripting skills only to see HTML5 emerge. We learn one set of user experience best practices only to see pads and tablets begin to rewrite the rules. We get to grips with long-form SEO content to find we’re suddenly restricted to 140 characters.

Of course its not just the technology. Online users are changing all the time. It wasn’t so long ago that Myspace sold for \$580m before Facebook spoiled the party.

## **Perpetually connected**

Today’s online users are less passive and better connected than ever before. They engage with each other and companies in a bewildering number of ways. Some are hyper-connected at home, at work and on the move. Some are locked down, fiercely protective of their privacy. And some, paradoxically, are both.

This has major implications if you’re trying to create an online strategy today.

## **Looking deeper, going further**

Websites and microsites are just part of an overall online strategy: you need to consider all your online presence to include the sites you connect to, third party content you embed, a user-generated content (UGC) policy and a host of other areas. This is what we call the engaged web and why you need a more holistic, 360° view of your presence online.

So, if we’re not in Kansas with Dorothy and Toto anymore, where exactly are we?

# 5 things that should be keeping you awake right now

We're not trying to scare you, but let's face it: a modern online strategy gives you a lot to think about. Here are the top five things you need to think about right now. >>



## 1 Social media – the elephant in the room, outside the room, in your pocket...

Social media is driving internet usage. People are connecting in ways that seemed impossible in the 20th century: we're talking Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Foursquare and who knows how many of blogs, communities, wikis.

That means new challenges if you're building an online strategy. How can you:

- Engage with what's already happening, where it's happening
- Deliver comparable social experiences on your own properties
- Encourage the right people to share your content
- Get more followers (and convert them into customers)

## 2 The age of the micro-celebrity

To misquote Andy Warhol, in the future, everyone will be famous for 15 tweets. People are seeking fame in their own way, to be seen as the one in the know among their friends and colleagues.

You need to work out how you can help? What can you do to assist people in building their own personal online brands? How can you make them feel special?

You might develop exclusive content. Or an invitation-only beta testing programme. Or offer privileged access to areas of your site. Fundamentally, you need to treat users differently.



### 3 Charlie bit my finger

Not long ago we sat back to enjoy professionally-produced content. Then (in no order) came YouTube, blogs, Flickr cheap camcorders and free editing software. And UGC exploded.

Who cares about high production values any more? Charlie bit my finger – just one minute of a baby biting his older brother's finger – is YouTube's most watched video. Over 280 million people have watched it in three years. Why? Because it is human and authentic and funny.

So here's your next challenge: make more engaging, more authentic and more sticky content.

### 4 Channel hopping

It's not too long ago that users struggled to find content. And what they could find was often little more than passive text and an image.

Well, that's changed and some – in fact many argue there's too much content out there to comment on, remix, retweet and aggregate.

It's no longer a question of text or video or audio. It's text and video and audio and presentations and tweets and, and, and. If you can't cut it, slice it, remix it and mash it up then you might as well forget it.

This means you should be asking not just how sticky your content is, but how stretchy too.

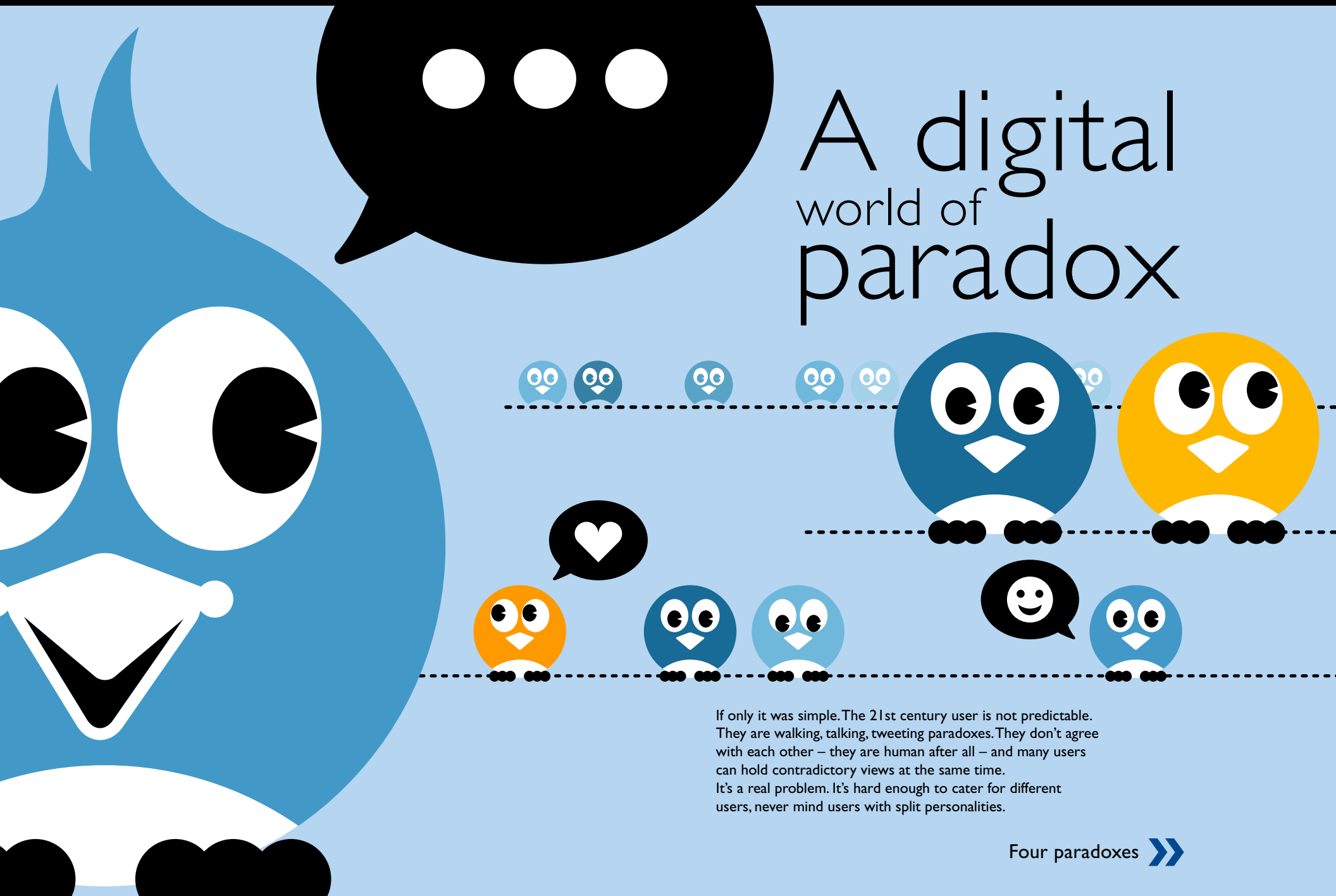
### 5 Show me the money

But, if you're in business, a thousand conversations count for nothing unless you can convert them into paying customers.

The days of simply judging success by likes, follows and tweets are over. Your boss has never been so interested in ROI. Senior management invest in one thing: the future well-being of the company.

What you need to do is link all that activity with tangible objectives and measurable results.

# A digital world of paradox



If only it was simple. The 21st century user is not predictable. They are walking, talking, tweeting paradoxes. They don't agree with each other – they are human after all – and many users can hold contradictory views at the same time. It's a real problem. It's hard enough to cater for different users, never mind users with split personalities.

## 1 One-to-one vs tribe

Today's users like one-to-one relationships. Technology (like SMS and IM) is replacing traditional face-to-face conversations.

And yet, the same users are forming and joining online communities - the web is full of loosely affiliated groups who centre passionately around a common tribal attitude.

## 2 Getting things done vs getting away from it all

We're more driven than ever before in work and play. We want stuff to happen and users look to brands for help – to get the right look for a night out or grow their businesses. That's why your site, above all else, needs to be useful.

But the internet is also a fantastic source of distractions and these driven people will soon lose themselves in a world of low-brow entertainment.



## 3 Fame vs anonymity

We've touched on a growing thirst for fame that comes at a time when users have never been more guarded on their privacy. Even the seemingly irresistible force of Facebook has fallen foul here. Privacy can never be or compromised.

## 4 140 characters vs deep immersion

We're all short of time these days. We snatch at information when and where we can get it. Being able to get what we want in the time we have available has become a core life skill.

Yet we play games that absorb hours of our time, surrounding us with multi-textured storylines that will take months to unravel. We augment our TV viewing with online back-stories that add layers to the experience.



These paradoxes have profound implications. You must be flexible to the changing needs of your customers and be present wherever they are (in whatever form they prefer).

### Helping customers on their terms

In practice a slow social sale – with all the attendant forums, reviews, ratings and testimonials etc – and ramps up with a rapid, painless, brilliantly executed buying experience.

It is often at this final, crucial phase that we see companies fail to turn goodwill into revenue. In some recent research, we found:

- 68% of retailers failed to use value-added content (blogs and articles) on their sites
- 24% didn't allow customers to share content (and only half the rest did it well)
- Yet, 30% of consumers have bought products on friend recommendations
- And 88% said that user reviews are important when they buy

Your strategy needs to cater for a tough modern world and it's easy to leave value on the table.

# What it all means for your online strategy



You have to begin thinking differently about your website. Unless, of course, you want to keep a traditional, out-dated view based on an impersonal, static experience.

You need to be more dynamic, more intimate and more expansive. Your site must be delicate enough to deal with flighty users but powerful and flexible enough to deliver the right experience. That means technology capable of supporting an evolving user-experience.

## The evolving core

Even at the core website level, the rules have changed. Today's users expect a lot. They want easy-to-find dynamic, interactive personalized content that they can share with others. They expect relevant, transparent, timely communications that recognise their relationship with the site. And they demand a slick, painless buying process that keeps them up to date with their order.

## Playing nice with others

You must recognise and embrace the idea that users (even the brand loyal ones) no longer have exclusive relationships with your site. You need to think deeply about how to integrate with other sites, communities and content. It means determining what to do at home, what you can do better with social media, and what content can be packaged and syndicated elsewhere.



## All about the experience

User experience is a huge issue. And not just for navigation and task resolution. It's important in a wider emotional sense. How are you making users feel? What connections are being made (with the brand, the content and other users)? What will users remember?

Crucially, user experience also has a direct impact on how you generate revenue online. Three things to consider:

- **Personalization** – how can you create a more individual experience based on what you know about the customer and their behaviour?
- **Conversion** – is your checkout process as clear and uncomplicated as it could be? Are you giving customers the necessary levels of confidence?
- **After sales** – some 60% of people favour sites they've successfully used before. They are also more likely to recommend sites where they've got a great experience. Are you capitalising on this?

User experience also brings up issues of control. How much should we surrender to users? Do they want that control or would they prefer the site to take the lead? Can we give them the choice to self-serve their experience? And can we tailor their experience in near real-time and recognise and adapt to their individual experience when they return?

You should think about this before a single pixel is pushed into place.

# Introducing the holistic web

So by now, you'll be starting to understand that you need to think about your online presence not just your site. Your world has changed. But what does such a holistic presence look like? And how do you begin to create one for your business? We're glad you asked.

## All about the users

Firstly – and this may sound odd coming from us – you shouldn't begin by thinking about your content management system (CMS) or, in fact, any of the technical aspects of your presence. (Trust us, there will be plenty of time to think about that later.)

The first thing you should think about is engagement. Specifically, how can you best engage with your users' lives in a way that makes sense for your business? And what's in it for them?

Online engagement can happen at many levels in many locations:

- With your core site
- With personalized content
- With your brand via third party sites
- With your own community
- With third party communities
- With social media interaction
- With e-mail marketing
- In your online store
- With after sales service

With all these levels, engagement is about meeting customers on their terms. It means focusing on what they care about and serving personalized content. You make their lives easier and create a mutually beneficial relationships.

## People are unique

Engagement itself can take many forms. The vast majority of users are relatively passive. They'll consume content but never comment on it. They may share it but will not co-create. And they may buy but won't rate and review.

Discovering where your own customers stand is key to planning a route forward – it is far better to move them in stages than to assume you will instantly convert passive viewers into active co-creators or early stage viewers into immediate sales.

There are many stages to planning your online presence, but we believe these can be categorized into what we call the four Cs – content, communication, community and commerce. To have a fully holistic online presence, it is important to consider each of these areas and have a coherent strategy to address them.

**Let's start with content.**

Content

## Stickiness, contagion and Kevin Bacon

**Content is still king. It drives traffic, search, sharing, social media and blogging. In fact, if you don't have a content strategy you are rapidly slipping into a coma.**

But what makes for good content? Why does some content get shared, discussed and acted upon while other content is ignored? And what can you do about it?

### Great content is sticky

Almost every one of us sees thousands of pieces of content every day: on television, on radio, in the press and, of course, online. However, you've probably already forgotten 99.9% of what you digested yesterday. That leaves a golden 0.01%, that you've bookmarked, saved or shared.

What are the characteristics of the content you valued. They were probably:

- Directly relevant to you, your life or your work
- Useful in getting something done
- Providing new information or challenge your assumptions
- Relatively simple and easy to digest
- Engaging, human and even emotional

As we know customers are different: some like ebooks, others prefer a video and some want an interactive webinar. And individuals will switch from one medium to another as they get closer to buying. You need to create versions and cuts to match your customers' needs.

And the content needs to be easy to find on your site and optimized for SEO so your good friends at Google et al can index it. And it should be easy to share. Which brings us to...

### Great content is contagious

It's becoming more difficult to reach customers effectively via traditional means. And, what's more, customer suspicion of explicitly marketing-focused materials is on the rise. Fortunately, that's not the whole picture.

People still trust other people. Word of mouth (or mouse) can break down the barriers. So the message is clear: make your content both compelling and sharable for extra value. An endorsement (explicit or implicit) is the antidote to rising cynicism.

Contagious content needs to be fresh and attention grabbing to be picked up by the right people.

### Kevin Bacon

Mr Bacon has starred in a lot of movies and worked with a lot of other actors. His impressive work ethic spawned the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon game. He is what author Malcolm Gladwell, in his highly influential book *The Tipping Point*, calls a connector. That is, someone who is connected to far more people than average.

Finding and serving connectors is crucial for success. Reaching the people with sizeable blog, Twitter and LinkedIn audiences can have an exponential impact on your content reach.

**But how do you plan content that will resonate?**





## 5 steps to a better content strategy

Our five steps are nothing new but most content marketing problems come from a breakdown of basics. Here's what you need to do:

### 1) Define your target audience

Who are you trying to reach? What do they care about? Can you cover them with a single piece of content or do you need a varied approach? Getting a firm handle on who you're speaking to – using a single representative model or a more broad brush persona – will help keep you focused. Don't create a funny viral video appealing to everyone if your audience is ophthalmologists specializing in the over 50s in the developing world.

### 2) Define your goals

Know what you want to achieve. Be realistic about what your content can do (most content is better at opening a conversation than closing a sale). Then create a step-by-step strategy to get you there. Importantly, have a clear idea of success. Decide what you'll measure, and how, using baseline measurements taken before you even start.

### 3) Do your research

Find out what others are doing in your area. Look for content gaps. A good place to start is by monitoring social media. What are people complaining about? What questions are they asking? Where are they looking for content? You can learn from what others have done well and what they've done badly.

### 4) Test

Run A/B tests to measure the impact of changes on conversion. (EpiServer Marketing Arena is an option for that). Time spent testing content variations is seldom wasted. Run testing as a process, not an event.

### 5) Appoint and train your content creators

Deciding who is actually going to create your contents often gets overlooked. Is it an in-house task or do you have external resources on hand? Whoever does it, make sure the content contributors understand your goals.

Communication

## Are we on the same wavelength?

Almost every business wants customer relationships that go beyond the transactional. And while everyone welcomes inbound traffic with open arms, there are also times when you need to reach out and touch someone. So how can you do it?

Getting a balance is tricky: too much communication and you risk being seen as a spammer; but too little and customers will think you just don't care.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Well, not quite. If you are deliver high-value communications then you'll get higher open rates, greater clickthroughs and permission to do a bit of selling as well.

Value comes in both soft and hard forms, including:

- Content and information
- Links to other items of interest
- Offers and sales incentives
- The tone of your communication
- Personalization – both in a 'Dear Joe' way and the content you deliver

Think about the customer first. If they're getting 10, 50, 100 plus emails a day (lots of it spam), why are they going to open yours?



### No email is an island

Don't (as many do) treat outbound communications as separate to the rest of their online strategy: in reality, outbound and inbound are part of the same thing, engaging effectively with customers and prospects.

Integration can take a number of forms:

- Linking web content and email marketing seamlessly
- Fusing database (CRM) and email marketing into the overall online experience so you get more accurate customer pictures
- Tracking and measuring performance and ROI to see what's working
- Uniting pre-sales with after-sales teams with consistent messaging

The goal is a more holistic view of your online (and offline) communications.

### Testing times

Sometimes it's good to go with your gut instinct. But what if that instinct is wrong?

We've already talked about how, using A/B testing, you can assess and improve virtually every aspect of your outbound communications and online presence. But why stop there. Engaging your customers in the process (either directly or through social media) will help you plan and create communications and content that resonates better and increases loyalty.

Community

## Socialize Everything

It's hard to bring people together around your business but, get it right, and you'll have a self-sustaining group of evangelists who, through recommendations, ratings, feedback and reviews, drive better content, increased conversions and repeat business.

Many fear the time and effort spent building (and maintaining) a community will be wasted. What if nobody comes?

But building your own community doesn't need to be an all or nothing approach. You can take a step-by-step approach and add social and community-focused elements to what you've already got:

1. **Blog with commenting** – If you're just starting out on your community journey, start here. (This is where we started at EPiServer.)
2. **Walls/bulletin boards** – Believe in your products and marketing? Then you've got everything to gain. If you don't believe in them, you've got bigger problems (go fix those first).
3. **Social bookmarking** – Make sure that what you say can be seeded easily.
4. **Share with friends** – Facilitate content sharing with buttons.
5. **Favourites** – Make it easy to bookmark and return to your page.
6. **Contests/polls/voting** – An audience loves to engage and this is the lowest threshold. Move viewers to "lurkers" with this easy step.
7. **Rating/tagging** – An easy thing to add, but so powerful. This is the easiest way to get your audience to interact with you.
8. **Chat/messaging** – Many social sites let users see who's online and start a chat or leave a message. Some companies take this a step further, making it easy to contact or chat with their experts, business partners or even their customers.
9. **Expert Panels** – These provide the ability to feed great content and begin discussions. Don't limit yourself to thinking that the experts have to be within your organisation, think about your partners as well.
10. **Forums** – A way to serve a community that's already there, eager to link up and share their thoughts.
11. **Community with profiles and groups** – A full community allowing members to self-select into sub-groups and engage with your brand (and each other) in a moderated environment.

As you can see, building communities can take many forms and can evolve and grow over time. The good news is that it needn't be a case of all or nothing. You can test your way toward success.

The benefits of socializing your business are countless. It's better information, tighter relationships, more trust, higher conversions and increased repeat business.

Good social practice is, at its heart, aligned with good business practice.



## Commerce

# Buy, buy or bye bye

Businesses thrive when they make money. And there's no slowing in online business growth. In 2010, total online sales in the UK alone grew by 18% year-on-year to £58.8bn, according to the IMRG and Capgemini e-Retail Sales Index.

Such growth breeds competition and you need a fully holistic buying experience to get and protect market share.

Customers now demand customer service options – from FAQs and email through to telephone support and instant chat. They expect to be able to share product details easily across social media. They want additional value-added content in the form of articles and blogs. And they expect to be rewarded for their loyalty.

You need to think about the whole buying cycle – from browsing to buying to after sales as just one failure can turn success into failure.

### Just looking?

Poor design, a badly thought out user experience and a clutter of grainy jpegs will certainly send buyers packing. Your design must be crisp, clean and user centred. Images must be of high quality (and preferably both zoomable and rotatable). And an easy intuitive (well functioning) search function is essential.

And former nice to haves are quickly becoming essentials - customers now expect to find user reviews and ratings (however scary they are for the retailer to implement) and want to be able to compare products quickly and easily. And customers are getting used to saving items and creating wishlists until they are ready to buy.

### Making the sale

Even when you've made the browsing process a pleasure, it's still possible to lose out on the sale. According to analysts Forrester, a staggering 88% of US web buyers have abandoned an online shopping cart without completing a transaction. It means that even at this stage, everything is still to play for.

There are, of course, the comfort factors. Are your prices competitive? Are your shipping costs clear (and fair)? Do you have easy, no hassle return policies?

Then, is the checkout process itself fast and painless? Can customers enter discount voucher codes? And are they kept informed of what's happening every step of the way?

### It doesn't end with the sale

The period immediately after the sale is where hard-earned loyalty (along with future sales, recommendations and great reviews) can be lost. Customers who receive order and shipping confirmations backed with online tracking are more likely to stay loyal.

Don't forget to capitalize on a job well done. Ask customers to rate and review you while the experience is fresh in their minds. Give them every opportunity (or even an incentive) to recommend you to family and friends. And suggest they might like to sign up for further communications from you.

Many retailers don't do any of this, yet in real terms the next sale starts right here.



## Bringing it all together

Today's online world is complex and exciting and the possibilities just continue to grow. The challenge is to choose the right options for the right objectives to the right audiences.

If you take only one thing away from this ebook, it's that you need to take a more holistic view of your online presence: it's what happens on your site, your internal activity and all other relevant sites. And it's about doing what works best rather than everything.

Of course, everyone needs to start somewhere. So whether you are updating a current strategy or creating a brand new one, here are five things to do right now:

1. Start with the four Cs – content, communication, community and commerce. Have a clear picture of what you are trying to achieve and how you'll measure it.
2. Align your business with your customers. What are your users doing online? Where? What are they interested in? What's keeping them awake at night? Crucially, how can you make their lives a little bit easier? And how does your business profit when you help them.
3. Model success. Look outside your business and industry. Find examples of organisations that excel in each of the four Cs and see what you can learn from their approach.
4. Start small, scale fast. No one has all the answers – certainly not ones that will work for every company. So it's important you experiment. Most of the latest developments can be tried out on a small scale for little cost. Try them. If they work, keep going and develop them further. If not, move on.
5. Ensure you have the right infrastructure in place. Unsurprisingly, we'd suggest any platforms you choose to use should have the power and flexibility to deal with the ever-changing online demands. So it pays to ensure you get the right foundations in place right from the start.

There has never been a better time to be working online. The scale of innovation is unprecedented (and shows no sign of slowing). Companies that grasp the opportunity to take a more holistic view of their online presence today will be the ones who succeed tomorrow.

## Give us your feedback

We would love to know what you think of this ebook.  
Do you agree? Disagree? Have we missed anything out?

You can give your feedback via Twitter to @episerver or by  
email to [marketing@episerver.com](mailto:marketing@episerver.com)

We look forward to hearing from you.

## About EPiServer

EPiServer, the leading supplier of solutions that enable true Web engagement and drive business results for end customers. 3,500 customers worldwide use EPiServer's technology platform that combines content, community, commerce, and communications with a configurable metrics dashboard.

EPiServer CMS is the foundation for more than 10,000 websites and is used by more than 130,000 web editors daily. The EPiServer platform is delivered through an extensive network of over 500 partner companies in 30 countries.

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