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How to Choose a Shopping Cart Solution
For Your Online Business

Introduction

If you want to offer anything for sale directly on your website – product, service, or event – you need what is called a *shopping cart* to process the purchases for you.

The online shopping cart is composed of 4 separate functions:

Shopping cart: The shopping cart offers the product for sale to the customer and displays the products chosen and total to the customer. It also handles inventory and order processing after the sale.

Payment processor: Accepting credit cards online requires an account with the major credit card providers (Visa, MasterCard, American Express, etc) to process the transaction for you. The most common payment processors include PayPal and traditional merchant accounts offered by banks and credit unions, but there are now some online-only payment processors as well.

Payment gateway: Payment gateway service providers handle the transportation of the data from your shopping cart to the payment processor securely. Payment processors may have their own payment gateway (PayPal, for example), but most simply interface with third-party providers. Some merchant accounts allow you to choose your own payment gateway; many require you to use one of their choosing. The most common one is Authorize.net. I often describe payment gateways as the armored cars of the online world since they only transport the financial data and don't interact with it.

Email: If you sell programs or events on your site, you'll want to put the buyers on an email list so you can communicate with them about their program/event after the sale. Some shopping cart solutions include this ability, some offer integration with established email service providers, and some don't offer this feature at all.

If these descriptions leave you a bit confused, please know that you are not alone. Many of the clients I work with are quite confused by how these pieces work together as well.

It can help to think of the various parts in this way:

> ➢ The shopping cart on your website works just like the shopping cart you grab when you go to the grocery store: it holds your purchases for you as you walk around the store so that they are all in one place when you get to the checkout lane.

➢ Up until the clerk tells you the total, you are still in the shopping cart function. However, when you swipe your payment card, that information is then transferred via a phone line to the payment processor. The phone line serves the function of the payment gateway online and transfers your data to the payment processor for processing.

➢ The payment processor then approves your payment and sends notification back through the payment gateway.

➢ The shopping cart (or register) then responds to that notification and prints out a receipt of the sale and handles delivery of the purchased product.

Adding this functionality to your website can be simple or complex, and expensive or affordable, depending on your business needs and what you can afford.

Shopping Cart Options

The easiest and least expensive shopping cart solution is a PayPal.com account. Accounts are free to set up and available to anyone, anywhere. Create a product in your account, add a button to your website, and you can begin selling your creations online in minutes.

But what if you want to offer more complicated shopping experience? For example:

- Deliver a confirmation email after purchase that contains a link to download your digital product
- Offer coupons or discounts to a select group of customers
- Recruit other businesses and individuals to promote your products in exchange for a commission (Affiliates)
- Allow customers to purchase multiple items in one transaction
- Track inventory so sales are not made for product that is out of stock (or to limit the number of registrations for an event)
- Automatically sign up your customers to your mailing list

You can do all of these things, and more, with a shopping cart for your website.

There are literally hundreds of shopping cart solutions out there. The trick is to find the one that offers the features you need at a price you can afford.

How to Choose the Right Solution for You

There are literally hundreds of shopping cart solutions out there and evaluating all of them can be overwhelming. To make the process easier, start with this four step process:

1. Make a list of the features that your business needs RIGHT NOW.
2. Make a list of the features that you will need in ONE YEAR.
3. Figure out your budget based on what you can afford RIGHT NOW.
4. Find a solution that gets you as close to your ONE YEAR features as possible while still being within your budget.

Setting your budget first is important. Just like when you shop for a home, you want to make sure that you are only looking at solutions that you can actually afford. Million dollar homes are nice, but if you look at them before you shop for your $200,000 house, everything you look at will seem less than acceptable.

While moving from one shopping cart solution to another does take some work – more work if you do it later in your business – most of that time investment is in the setup of your new system, not in moving your content over. Your actual data is usually pretty easy to migrate. But the carts that are more complicated – Infustionsoft and Ontraport[1], in particular – take some time to set up even if you choose them from the beginning, so the difference between doing it now and doing it later is really very negligible.

Don't let yourself get sucked into signing up for a program that you can't reasonably afford *today* because you worry about how much work it might take to switch later.

Here are a couple of questions to ask as you evaluate the features of potential shopping carts:

- What is the setup fee? Are there recurring fees? Are the fees something you can afford *right now* on your current income?
- Does the basic system include all of the functionality that you need or will you have to upgrade your account or buy additional add-ons?
- How easy is it to get your data out? To migrate to another system? Download to your accounting system? Or run reports?
- If you sell physical goods, how does it process shipping and sales tax?
- If you sell downloadable material, does it provide encrypted download links that expire (this prevents people from sharing the links with other's who haven't purchased)?
- How good is the system's email deliverability? Is there anything that you can do – as a user – to improve the deliverability of the email you send? (Deliverability is discussed in more detail in a later section.)
- How well does it integrate with other programs? In particular, does it integrate with membership plugins (*Wishlist: Member* or *eMember*) or an affiliate tracking program?

You'll find charts on the next two pages. While it would have been impossible to include every shopping cart available, I included samples of the most common types of carts: all-in-one solutions, plugin-based solutions, and carts designed specifically for physical product. The first chart lists the Pros and Cons of each cart; the second lists the individual features of the same carts.

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[1] Ontraport used to be called Office Autopilot. Whichever name you know it by, its' the same company and the same product.

Cart	Pros	Cons
1ShoppingCart	• All-in-one solution: Shopping cart and Email Service Provider • Handles both digital and physical product well	• Monthly fee PLUS a transaction fee • Complicated to set up and use. • Lots of great features you probably will never use.
WP eStore	• Inexpensive so nearly everyone can afford it • One-time fee includes lifetime updates and great tech support • Automatically subscribe buyers to MailChimp, Aweber or GetResponse list	• WordPress is required (self-hosted) • Best suited for digital products and events. Can do physical product, but functionality is limited.
Ecwid.com	• Beautiful catalog of products • Easy to set up, including complicated shipping and tax options. • Use one catalog and sell on many websites	• No payment plan feature • No built in autoresponder system or easy to set up integration with other Email Service Providers
Ontraport and Infusionsoft	• All-in-one solution: Shopping cart and Email Service Provider • Behavior-based marketing • Track all activity of your subscribers – emails open and sent, clicks, visits to your website.	• Price makes it too expensive for those getting started • Set up is fairly complicated, although there are good training videos and their support is great.
Premium Webcart	• Hosting of your website is included in your subscription. • Includes everything in one place: Website, Shopping cart, Affiliate program, Email System. Even has built in membership functionality.	• Limited integration available for other software solutions • Hosting your site on their system is best for complete integration: affiliate program, membership site.
WooCommerce	• Try it out for free: Basic plugin is available in the WordPress Codex • Beautiful integration with WordPress themes by WooThemes	• WordPress is required (self-hosted) • Basic plugin has very limited functionality. The features that you will want – including email sent after purchase – will cost you extra.

Shopping Cart Features

	eStore	eStore with Affiliate Platform	Ecwid	1Shoppingcart (Standard)	1Shoppingcart (Premium)	Infusionsoft	Ontraport	Premium WebCart	WooCommerce
WordPress integration available	X[6]	X[6]	N/A	N/A	N/A	X[1]	X[1]	X[1]	X[6]
Website hosting						X	X	X	
Auto newsletter sign up	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X[2]
Coupons	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X[2]
Encrypted download links	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
Easy membership site integration	X	X		X[1]	X[1]	X[1]	X[1]	X[1]	X[1]
Multiple shipping options			X	X	X	X	X	X	X[2]
Recurring billing	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X
Transaction fee				1.25%	0.75-1.0%				
Track sales across multiple domains[3]			X	X	X	X	X	X	
Affiliate management		X	X[2]		X	X	X	X[2]	X[2]
PayPal integration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Merchant Account Integration	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
Price	$49.95 (one-time)	$79.95 (one time)	$15/mo	$34/mo	$99/mo	$299/mo	$297/mo	$147.99/mo[5]	Free[4]

Note 1 - Integration exists but may be new or not easy to use.

Note 2 - Extra paid add-on required for this functionality.

Note 3 - In order to track across domains, the shopping cart url cannot be cloaked as your domain; Your payment pages will say www.mcssl.com (1shoppingcart) or

www.ontraport.com (Ontraport), not www.yoursite.com

Note 4 - Although the initial shopping cart plugin is free, most of the functionality that you will want comes from paid add-ons.

Note 5 - There are lesser-priced plans available but this is the only one that offers comparable features to the other platforms.

Note 6 - WordPress is Required for the plugin to work. Must be a self-hosted installation of WordPress, not a blog at WordPress.com

These are just a few of the available shopping cart options. If you didn't find the one that would work best for you here, search Google for "online shopping cart" or "shopping cart solutions."

A Note about Email Service Providers

Some shopping cart solutions include email newsletters, but for most of the less-expensive options, you'll be using a separate *Email Service Provider* in conjunction with your shopping cart.

Not all Email Service Providers (or ESPs) are the same. Most offer very similar features but not all are the same when it comes to *deliverability.*

Deliverability

Sending an email does not guarantee that it makes it to the recipient's inbox. Messages that look like spam -- or are sent from servers known to send spam -- are blocked or rerouted by spam filters. Successful deliverability is dependent on the Email Service Provider following best practices and ensuring that everyone on their system also follows best practices. This is one of those cases where one bad apple – or in this case a *bad spammer* -- can ruin things for everyone.

You'll want to choose an ESP that has policies in place that keep spammers off of their servers -- and that punish those who break the rules. In other words, this is one place in life where you want to look for a company that p*eople actually complain about.* No complaints means that even if they have rules, they don't enforce them.

Each ESP sets its own policy regarding spam and spam-like behavior. Read the Terms of Use for the platform that you choose so you know what behavior you need to keep an eye on.

And read the [CAN-SPAM Act.](#) This Act governs all marketing done via email and applies to you regardless of whether or not you've even heard of it before. There are monetary fines for breaking the rules so it is best to be educated and informed, rather than sorry and broke.

Here are some notes on some of the most popular to help you choose the one that is right for you:

AWeber. AWeber has many ardent fans so it's easy to find people who will tell you that their service is the best, but it may not be the best choice for you. A couple of things to keep in mind:

AWeber has beautiful optin boxes, but only if you like what they have created. The beauty is created with images so you cannot edit them beyond their handful of provided options.

AWeber is what I call OCD about the double-optin. All Email Service Providers that have good deliverability control what people do on their platform to some extent and AWeber requires the double-optin to ensure that those people who are on your list *really* want to be on your list. As a result, there are only two ways to add people to your list without having them double-optin is to use their hosted-optin form code and choose the single-optin option.

If you add subscribers manually – for instance, if you circulate a list of the attendees at a speaking engagement and ask if they'd like to be on your mailing list – those folks will still have to confirm their subscription. Likewise, if you combine your lists, they have to confirm again for the new list. If you auto-subscribe them to a list with your shopping cart (like eStore), they have to click that confirmation email to get on your list (unless you have received special permission from AWeber's compliance department). If you move from another ESP to AWeber, they have to confirm again (While the double-optin is best, and recommended by all ESPs, it is not as forcibly enforced by any other ESP).

AWeber doesn't offer a free plan, but you can try it out for $1. You'll pay at least $19/month (for 500 subscribers) for their service and fees increase as your subscriber base increases. AWeber.com

MailChimp: MailChimp offers a completely free account that is quite sufficient for those just getting started (for up to 2k subscribers and/or 12,000 sends a month). When you upgrade to a paid account, you gain access to their autoresponder system which not only allows you to send out a sequence of emails to your subscribers based on when they subscribe, but also allows you to customize email sequences based on behavior (for example, if they open a particular email or click a particular link). This *behavior based marketing* is generally only available in more expensive shopping cart solutions (Infusionsoft and Ontraport).

MailChimp recommends the double-optin but doesn't so adamantly enforce it. On MailChimp, you can move people from one list to another easily. You can also import a list of contacts without having them optin again. And with eStore, you can subscribe them to your email list *without the double-optin.*

This is because MailChimp controls spammer-type behavior differently. Instead of caring how someone got ON your list, MailChimp cares about how you *treat people after they subscribed*. If you receive a high number of spam complaints (your subscriber clicks the "this is spam" button) relative to your self-classified industry, your account will be suspended and MailChimp will talk with you about what you did that may have caused the problem. If you are willing to change your behavior, they give you your account back. If you don't want to change, they will give you access to your account so you can download your contacts and take them to an ESP that is more in alignment with how you want to market.

In addition to the completely free account, MailChimp offers both monthly plans and pay-as-you-go plans. Plans start at $10 a month. MailChimp.com

GetResponse: For people who don't like AWeber or MailChimp, there's GetResponse.

Instead of subscribing people to a list, optins are subscribed to a "Campaign" that can consist of several types of messages. Campaigns can contain messages sent:

- As an autoresponder sequence consisting of multiple messages, based on date subscribed.
- Immediately after sign up.
- Based on behavior: opening an email or clicking a link
- On a personalized date, such as a birthday.

The optin boxes provided by GetResponse look very much like those in AWeber. So much so, in fact, that I bet you can't tell them apart *(That's GetResponse on the left and AWEber on the right).*

GetResponse's are a bit easier to update and allow for more color choices, but still, you are limited to what they provide (unless you know a programmer).

But unlike AWeber, you can import contacts into GetResponse without requiring them to confirm their subscription again.

And unlike MailChimp, all of your subscribers end up on one list, which makes sending out your regular newsletter simple.

One caution: Although the features that GetResponse offers are similar to those of MailChimp and AWeber, they do little to control how people use their platform. As a result, you can expect that their deliverability rates will not be as good.

Try out GetResponse free for 30 days. Plans start at $15 a month. GetResponse.com

Integration

As you start growing your business, you may find that you'd like to add additional features to your marketing efforts. When you choose a solution that includes great integration, it is easy to add these extra features without having to switch the underlying platform that you are using.

Integration means you can combine the platform or software that you are using with other, separate software and have them work together as a whole. In short, the software *plays nice with others.*

Some software is designed from the get-go to work well with other software applications while some is really designed to be a stand-alone product.

Both AWeber and MailChimp have great APIs (Application Programming Interface) which allows their software to communicate with other software programs accurately. This API is very easy for programmers to use so you'll find AWeber and MailChimp are often the first, and sometimes the *only*, ESPs that a particular software package has built-in integration for.

WP eStore has built in integration with MailChimp, AWeber, and GetResponse. You can also use it with any Email Service Provider that allows you to add new subscribers by sending their information to a dedicated email address, for example listname@aweber.com.

Platforms like Ontraport and Premium Webcart offer integration with WordPress, but that integration was added on top of their main software; the platform itself was designed to be self-contained. As a result, you may find that the integration doesn't work the way that you would like it to, or it is difficult to find adequate support to get the integration running properly.

Since you can't know in advance where your business will take you, choosing a solution that offers great integration is one of the best ways to ensure that the system that you choose today will still work for you tomorrow.

Your Choice

Don't let the seeming complexity of online shopping carts keep you from adding one to your website; they can dramatically increase the number of sales you make online, thereby improving your bottom line.

About the Author

Lesa Townsend is an Online Business Consultant and Trainer. Lesa uses traditional business building strategies combined with the latest technological innovations to support her clients in expanding their businesses online. She specializes in helping service professionals learn what it takes to be successful online. Lesa's free and inexpensive virtual trainings can be found at: Udemy.com/user/lesa-townsend/

Appendix A: Affiliate Compensation Disclosure

This book, *How to Choose a Shopping Cart Solution for Your Online Business*, includes links to recommended products and some of these links are affiliate links. If you click the link and buy the product, I may receive financial or other compensation.

However, I don't base my recommendations on whether or not I will receive compensation; but rather on whether the resource in question is a good fit for my clients.

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Here's my full legal disclosure:

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