Stoking the fire of online conversion: your complete CRO checklist

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Online conversion rate optimization (CRO) is your key to selling more without the need to increase website traffic.

Think of CRO as the steam train of your ecommerce strategy. Many individual tasks need to happen simultaneously to make the wheels move. Water and fuel are required to make your engine run, with a fireman stoking the boiler compartment to keep things running, much like ecommerce marketers implementing marketing tactics that attract and engage shoppers.

The steam from stoking a water-filler boiler's fire activates the pistons, which turn the train's wheels. Similarly, everything that happens behind the scenes of your website, such as performance, SEO, and your tech stack, drives a burning desire for shoppers to stay on-site.

Just as train drivers rely on railway signaling to transport passengers safely to their destinations, on-site signals can alter the shopper's journey. Think about how you're demonstrating trust and security, helping shoppers find the right products, and offering options across payment and delivery.

Finally, when the passengers on this CRO steam train have an outstanding post-purchase experience, they'll want to jump back on board to take another journey with you.

If these train analogies haven't driven you 'round the bend yet, it's time to charge full-steam ahead into your CRO checklist!

Begin with the basics

☑️ Understand how conversion affects revenue

Research from Wordstream shows that, across industries, the average landing page conversion rate is 2.35%. However, the top 25% of sites are converting at more than double that rate—at a massive 5.31%.

All online retailers are different, though. Some sell products that rely on a higher level of consumer education before shoppers make a purchase. Others may sell the same or similar products to competing stores, which shoppers frequently price-check against each other. The bottom line is that conversion rate isn't a one-size-fits-all metric. That's why it's critical to understand, track, and think strategically about your brand's conversion rate.

What happens when you find the winning formula for optimizing your conversion rate?

Three words: *massive revenue gains*.

Here's a quick look at the impact of doubling your conversion rate. Let's say your site attracts 20,000 visitors per week, has a 2.5% conversion rate, and an average order value of $150. Doubling that conversion rate to 5.0% would take your annual revenue from $3.9M to a whopping $7.8M—and that's without incurring any additional marketing costs or even attracting any new traffic to your site.

While not every brand will achieve a 5.31% conversion rate, moving the needle in the right direction can significantly improve revenue and overall profitability.

☑️ Calculate your conversion rate

Before implementing strategies to move the needle of conversion, you need to know your current state. Start with your order and website visitor data on hand to determine your current ecommerce conversion rate.

Divide the number of orders (conversions) by your total site visitors for a defined period. For example, if you had 10,000 site visitors last month and saw 250 orders placed during that time, your conversion rate was 2.5% for the month.

That seems like a lot of website traffic for a relatively small number of orders, right? That's precisely why conversion rate optimization (CRO) should be a top priority.

Marketing Tactics

☑️ SEO

While you might not immediately think of SEO as part of a traditional CRO strategy, it can significantly impact the "messy middle" of the buyer journey. During this stage, shoppers often bounce between pages and sites, deliberating over product suitability and making purchase decisions.

Consider how your shoppers search for products and the details they'll see on search engine results pages (SERPs). For example, what do your product page titles and meta descriptions look like on SERPs? Do they highlight key aspects of items and entice shoppers to click through?

See Chapter 03 of our in-depth eBook, Elevating your website conversion rate in 2024 (and beyond), which delivers some SEO wizardry to attract and convert the right shoppers.

☑️ Pricing strategy

Statista shows that 60% of US shoppers compare prices between a few different sites before making a purchase. Pricing can be a determining factor in whether your site visitors bounce or buy your products. Pay close attention to market conditions to create product price points that are not only profitable but also competitive and enticing to your customers.

Some of the pricing strategies to consider include:

Competitor pricing – based on the average price points of rival brands in your space.

Dynamic pricing – AKA demand-based pricing adjusts constantly to consumer demand, supply, competition, seasonality, and even special events. If you were one of thousands paying $40 for a water bottle at a Taylor Swift concert, you already have some idea of how dynamic pricing strategy works.

Price skimming – a high price entry-point where early adopters and die-hard fans will pay a premium for the latest items.

Penetration pricing – a low price entry-point for a new product that can stimulate demand while establishing market presence. Though profitability is often at a minimum (or a minus), brands generally increase pricing once they've established market penetration.

Psychological pricing – such as charm pricing and prestige pricing. Charm pricing aims just below a whole number, for example, $79.99 instead of $80. Consumers perceive a discounted or getting a good deal compared to the whole-number alternative—even when it's only a 1-cent difference. In contrast, prestige pricing opts for whole numbers. By making a bold statement that products aren't discounted, this tactic taps into feelings of exclusivity. Luxury brands often use rounded-off item prices for this reason.

☑️ Storytelling

What's the difference between selling a product and selling a brand? *Human connection.*

Studies conducted by Innova reveal that 56% of global consumers say stories about a brand influence their purchase decisions.

"Even if you make condensed soup, tell consumers why you make it like that," commented Lu Ann Williams, director of innovation for Innova, on this subject.

Throughout every product description, product display page (PDP), social post, or marketing email, ask yourself, "What's the story we're telling?" Think about why it matters to your ideal customers and what value they gain from hearing that story.

Behind the scenes

☑️ Website performance

BigCommerce reports that 79% of Australian shoppers are likely or very likely to leave a website and purchase elsewhere if the site load speed is too slow. WebsiteBuilderExpert also reports that 74% of mobile users in the US will leave a mobile site if it doesn't load within five seconds.

Take a close look at how your site handles aspects such as:

- Image optimization to reduce the file size and load time of all images
- Limiting redirects to reduce the time taken passing shoppers from one URL to another
- Minifying CSS and JavaScript files to remove unnecessary code that can slow things down
- Identifying whether a shared hosting or dedicated server configuration is suitable for your store
- Using a content delivery network (CDN) to reduce the distance between a shopper's location and the physical server that's delivering your website's information
- Conducting performance and load testing to know how your infrastructure will handle an influx of traffic during sales and peak trading periods

☑️ Meta descriptions

When creating your product descriptions, it's vital to think about them from an SEO perspective. Why? A study by marketer Brian Dean shows that the top 3 Google search results get 75% of all clicks. Google and other SERPs focus on elevating meta descriptions that best answer the searcher's intent.

By providing Google with well-crafted, informative copy that answers customers' queries, you're helping SERPs—and shoppers.

Top tips for creating excellent ecommerce meta descriptions include:

1. Keep it 160 characters or less
2. If your ecommerce platform doesn't provide a preview tool, use a free SERP simulator to see how the meta description will appear
3. Make the description enticing for users to click through. Include details of the product or category and how it fulfills the customers' needs
4. Relate the meta description to the page title to build an engaging link between the two
5. Include primary and secondary keywords
6. Be careful not to "stuff" keywords in, as it can reduce the quality of the copy
7. Use action words and phrases like "discover", "explore", or "find out how..."
8. Avoid duplicating descriptions. Each one should be unique to every product
9. Write for people, not robots. Having all the right keywords means nothing if shoppers aren't compelled to click through

☑️ Friendly 404 and zero results pages

A 404 (page not found) error or on-site search queries that return zero results don't need to be the end of the road for shoppers. Consider how you can keep shoppers engaged on these pages and keep them moving towards the checkout—rather than away from it.

Personalized product recommendations can be placed anywhere on your site and are incredibly effective on 404 or zero results pages. Searchspring customer 2XU makes clever use of product recommendation carousels, serving shoppers with recommendations based on their observed browsing and buying behaviors.

☑️ A/B testing

A/B testing (AKA split testing) brings a data-led approach to understanding which ecommerce elements across website design, content, communications, and functionality resonate with your audience the most. With a well-planned, structured testing methodology, you make valuable changes to the online shopping experience that increase conversion.

Consider A/B testing elements such as:

Site navigation – will simple and streamlined menu options help shoppers get to the checkout faster than multiple drop-down sub-menus?

Advanced search filter options – like product attributes and unique selling points that may help shoppers narrow their search results more effectively.

Product display page (PDP) layouts – including different types of product imagery, where information, and how much information is displayed on PDPs.

Website pop-ups – learn what your shoppers actually think about on-site pop-ups. Do they help or hinder the road to conversion? It's also worth testing different types of pop-ups, for example, welcome pop-ups offering immediate discounts versus exit intent pop-ups.

Email A/B tests – including abandon-cart flows, special offers, newsletters, targeted campaigns, and more. Also, consider A/B testing various elements of your email campaigns, such as template design, subject lines, pre-header text, send times, email length, copy, and CTAs.

See HubSpot's excellent article about how to do A/B testing for help with planning your A/B tests.

☑️ Tech stack

Your ecommerce technology stack is the framework of platforms, apps, programming, and tools used to build and manage your website and its connected services. Think of your tech stack as your digital Swiss Army Knife that can carve out more engaging online shopping experiences.

Shopify reports that 67% of companies are changing or planning to change their current tech stack to prepare for the future. However, there are many options out there—and technology isn't a one-size-fits-all solution.

When building and enhancing your tech stack, it's vital to research the options that will suit your brand's individual needs and plan ahead for future growth. Look closely at the aspects of tech solutions, such as how they can scale as your brand grows, system usability, how they impact the customer experience, integration capabilities with other tech in your stack, and the long-term value they represent.

For more ideas about building a winning tech stack, see our 3-part series about choosing the ecommerce technology solutions for global growth.

On-site signals

☑️ Design

Website design is often discussed in terms of usability and aesthetics—but it can also be used to influence conversion. For example, a consumer's focus has a direct correlation with conversion. Unbounce analyzed over 20,000 lead-generation landing pages to understand how the number of links displayed affects conversion rates.

What did that analysis find? Those with just 1 link converted at a massive 13.5%, and in general, the more links on a landing page, the lower the conversion. There are some exceptions, but helping shoppers stay focused on the desired calls-to-action (CTAs) can prompt them to take the next steps.

Also, consider how your site design captures attention through visual elements, responds to different screen sizes or devices, communicates emotion, builds brand consistency, and reduces friction along the path to purchase.

Read more from Unbounce about the 7 principles of conversion-centered design.

☑️ Product discovery

By enhancing the on-site product discovery process, you can drive more engaging experiences for shoppers, help them find their ideal products, and complete their shopping journey faster.

Consider these tactics to boost the product discovery experience:

Search bar auto-complete – helps shoppers find what they want before they've even finished their sentences. Autocomplete functionality, like that used by Searchspring, incorporates merchandising rules, filtering options, and individual shopper behaviors to suggest text and image previews of the most relevant terms and products. This time-saving experience drives a seamless and engaging product discovery journey for your shoppers.

Product bundling – speed up the discovery journey for shoppers by putting related or complimentary items at their fingertips. Product bundling tactics can reduce the "pain of paying" by showing customers they're getting a good deal on the included products. See our in-depth article, Why product bundling works: Connecting psychology with sales, for a strategic approach to bundling.

Automated merchandising – brands need to continuously give online shoppers fresh experiences. Merchandising technology, like Searchspring, keeps a sense of newness to merchandising collections while doing the heavy lifting. Automatic boosting of featured products, best-sellers, or even sale items puts the right products in front of shoppers—without the need to manually rearrange your item display. Additionally, merchandising campaigns can be quickly duplicated and adjusted for seasonality, collections, and inventory to optimize merchandising for multiple regions.

> "Before using Searchspring, I remember a wide sales event we had covering many categories – around 20 pages across two sales collections. I spent an entire 8-hour day going through a merchandising process of 'drag product, save, drag again, save', grouping brands and piecing together an appealing display for our sales collections. We also spent around 2 hours each week just merchandising new arrivals pages. It now takes about 5 minutes on a Friday to tweak and check collections using the rules and logic in Searchspring."
>
> — *Alicia Davis, Digital Project Specialist, Incu*

☑️ Trust and security

Your website holds key indicators that act as trust and security signals—particularly to new shoppers. Consider how you can:

- Communicate your brand's beliefs and values to build trust through connection
- Take appropriate steps to enhance the data security of your ecommerce site
- Use trust badges to signal site security and reduce shoppers' risk perception
- Make privacy policies accessible in your website footer that detail how and why you use your customers' information
- Prominently display direct contact information on your site, including email addresses and phone numbers for customers who may need help during their buying journey
- Lean on customers to help build brand trust. Make use of user-generated content (UGC), including reviews, social content, or average star ratings to show social proof to other shoppers

For even more ideas, see our in-depth article, How trust and security put shoppers in a purchase-ready state.

☑️ Payment options

Linnworks data shows that nearly nine in ten consumers think seamless and flexible ecommerce payment options speed up their decision-making and prompt them to spend more. That's a massive opportunity to increase conversion.

Think about including a range of payment gateway options that your ideal customers most commonly use. If you're unsure, short surveys can be effective in gaining first-hand data to make informed decisions. Payment options to consider include Visa, Mastercard, PayPal, Google Pay, Apple Pay, Square, Stripe, and Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) options.

Where you plan to expand internationally can also influence your payment processing requirements. Think about adopting the most relevant regional adoptions, such as PayPal in Australia, AliPay and WeChat in China, Paytm in India, or Samsung Pay in South Korea.

☑️ Delivery options

Online shoppers love convenience—and are willing to pay for it. While many want the fastest and lowest-cost option, many more want their choice of delivery solutions.

Seko data shows that 46% of shoppers say the choice of a convenient and personalized delivery service is a key factor in their online buying decisions.

The BigCommerce 2023 Online Shopping Report ANZ report also shows that 47% of shoppers are willing to pay an additional $20 for same-day or less than three-hour shipping options at checkout. 18% will also pay that same amount for weekend, 6pm-8pm, or specific 1-2 hour delivery window options.

Ask your customers which delivery options they want so you can help them convert faster—and satisfy the needs of those willing to pay for higher-end delivery services.

Post-purchase experience

☑️ After-sale communication

Post-purchase dissonance occurs when your customer feels unsatisfied or uneasy after making a purchase. This feeling happens when a shopper's expectations are misaligned with the actual outcome of a purchase.

To keep customers feeling the post-purchase love, map out your after-sale communication flows to ensure you're touching base with them at the moments that matter. For example, the Körber 2023 State of Shipping and Returns Report shows the number of customers who want to know about various delivery stages:

46% – when the order is being packed.

51% – when the order is delayed.

60% – when the order is out for delivery.

58% – when the order is received.

17% – post-delivery, following up after order receipt.

You can also reassure shoppers you value their business—and their opinions—by asking for their reviews and feedback. However, be mindful of reaching out at the right times. For example, asking a customer for feedback after their order has been lost in transit may not attract the best response.

Additionally, look at your non-sale touchpoints during your relationship with a customer. Personalized offers such as early invites to sales events or birthday coupons will remind customers you're thinking about them between purchases and encourage re-conversion.

☑️ Returns

76% of first-time customers with an "easy" or "very easy" returns experience say they would shop with that retailer again, according to Narvar research. That's over three-quarters of shoppers that will re-convert, given the right returns experience.

To make returns as easy as possible:

- Offer customers self-service pages where they can quickly complete return requests and gain instant approval
- Give customers email and SMS updates on returns tracking, processing, and refund information to build confidence the whole way through
- Make it simple for them to use live chat features, and when customers need help with more complex queries, make it quick to connect with customer service reps

☑️ Remarketing

Remarketing re-engages consumers who have already interacted with your brand, serving them more relevant advertising based on their previous behaviors. Four primary types of remarketing—search, display, social media, and email—can help you reconnect with site visitors and move them back into a purchase-ready mindset.

Map out or review your remarketing goals. For example, how much do you want to focus on brand awareness versus driving direct action? Consider how to segment your audience to get the right message to the right shoppers and how often to remarket to them. As with all advertising strategies, continually test, learn, apply those learnings, and re-test.

See Creatopy's in-depth article that includes more tips about remarketing strategies.

See your customer's perspective on CRO

CRO really is the steam train of your ecommerce strategy. If you fail to stoke the fire, keep the signals operating, or give customers a reason to jump back onboard, you could miss substantial revenue opportunities.

As you work through your CRO checklist, keep one more thing front of mind: your customers' perspective. Experience the journey first-hand by going through the end-to-end purchasing process for your brand as a real shopper.

Look at your site from an unbiased perspective—or ask a friend to complete an order on your behalf. Is it easy to find your products or website through SERPs? Can you quickly discover the products you need on-site? Does the checkout process provide the payment and delivery options you expect? Is the post-purchase experience up to the same standard as all other aspects of the purchasing experience?

Every incremental improvement you make to your CRO strategy can push the needle further in the right direction—and keep your revenue engine charging full-steam ahead.

Want more ways to increase conversions? Check out our complete ecommerce guide to conversion rate optimization!

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