

SELECTING ECOMMERCE WEB HOSTING & SUPPORT

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May 2015*

When you design and build a new online store, it's easy to anticipate all the traffic you'll attract, the increased conversion rate you'll see, and the huge jump in sales you'll enjoy. Keep in mind that even the most amazing site is only as good as the hosting and support provider you select.

We all know a speedy site keeps visitors shopping and that every minute of downtime has the potential to cost your business significant revenue. But what many don't realize is how much more is riding on that decision.

Your eCommerce site lies at the heart of your business. Every other aspect of your company interacts with your store as part of a finely balanced system. Operations, accounting, manufacturing, inventory, warehousing, shipping, your supply chain and more, are all affected by what takes place on your eCommerce site.

So it's important to do your research to familiarize yourself with the key issues. To help you out, the LYONSCG eCommerce hosting and support teams have selected five considerations, based on our experience, for you to think about.

1. DON'T FIXATE ON A SIMPLE COMPARISON OF "HOURS INCLUDED"

It may seem simple enough to compare support contracts that include a built-in or fixed number of support hours. However, such a comparison seldom yields an apples-to-apples comparison.

A contract with a set number of hours per month doesn't reflect the reality that more support hours are used in the first quarter of a new site's launch than any other time during the site's lifecycle. Research of LYONSCG customer base suggests that over a three-year lifecycle, the typical eCommerce website uses 33% of total lifetime support hours in the first 90 days following launch. If you require extra hours beyond the allocation in those early days of your launch, you'll pay a premium. Don't lock yourself into paying more than you need to over the long-term.

Another reason to look beyond the number of hours you receive is to ask about the level of experience and knowledge of the staff doing the work. A quoted number of hours could quickly be used up if a staff member doesn't have the training needed to solve a problem.



You should also look at how hours are accounted for. Does the hosting company record activity in increments or do they round-up to the closest hour? You don't want a 15 minute task to be registered as an hour.

Don't be misled by a menu of suggested time frames for specific tasks. What you should really be concerned with is how the support organization will assure the most efficient use of hours. You want a provider who takes an overall approach to doing what's right for your business.

With a Magento site, the flexibility of an open platform provides the ability to configure your store to achieve a variety of objectives. However, the cost of that flexibility is complexity — which will impact the use of support hours for your website.

Take a long-term view of hosting and support. It's less about a maintenance menu and more about the many business critical issues that go into a successful eCommerce site.

2. LOOK BEYOND SERVER UP-TIME

Your real focus should be BUSINESS up-time. Every data center provides guarantees on up-time for its servers. How well servers and the eCommerce application software work together to keep your store up and running is much more crucial. That's why you should consider choosing a support partner who also runs their own datacenter to host your eCommerce application software.

A quick response to any technical issues is the primary benefit. If the application and servers are managed and/or supported by different organizations, recovery is delayed by the amount of time it takes to identify the appropriate owner of the problem. Imagine the degree of coordination and communication this takes; not to mention all the



possible finger pointing involved. With outages that can cost hundreds or thousands of dollars per minute, even short discussions of responsibility have measurable (and steep!) costs.



One more practical aspect to combining hosting and support is the experts work together every day. You benefit when application engineers along with server administrators or network engineers are experts in their roles and know how to interact effectively.

3. CONSIDER FLUENCY WITH ECOMMERCE APPLICATION

An eCommerce site is in constant movement from the moment it's launched: products are added or deleted; traffic levels can surge, product information changes; tax tables are modified; inventory levels fluctuate; new payment options are accepted, etc. Imagine how much better eCommerce hosting and support can be when your provider has a sophisticated understanding of the application based on their own experience.

Sites get built and tested in an environment that can't fully re-create everything the real world will throw at it. When a site is handed over and loaded into a real production environment, issues will arise. If a third-party hosting provider is not familiar with the application you use, they're most likely going to build an infrastructure that addresses the lowest common denominator for that system's requirements. This will only add to the problem.

When a hosting and support provider also builds eCommerce sites with the application you use, a tight feedback loop is created. Web Developers will quickly learn how to build a better site as the Hosting team passes along learnings; while your site benefits from fewer issues.

4. LOOK FOR AN OPEN APPROACH TO SUPPORT

You'll save money by leveraging your own staff who are trained on your platform. It makes sense to take advantage of their understanding of your eCommerce business when developing a hosting and support strategy. It also can pay off to use in-house expertise should you want to experiment with new eCommerce ideas.

Be wary of a hosting provider who may claim that it's more efficient to take over your website completely. Squeezing out your staff leaves you open to losing control of your site.

5. CONDUCT A FULL WEBSITE OR CODE-LEVEL REVIEW

You'll want to begin a relationship with a new hosting or support partner by establishing a strong baseline for your current site. The code review will reveal an inventory of any pre-existing conditions you expect to be resolved, and will ensure that your new partner has a familiarity with your website.

If your code base is solid, you may be able to negotiate lower support fees because your site has been well-constructed and should be easier to maintain. (See Sidebar on Quality Code Commenting)

Sidebar: What Should a Code Review Include?

A code review is actually just one item in a list of on-boarding activities you'll want to discuss when beginning a relationship with a new hosting or support provider. We recommend you look at:

INFRASTRUCTURE

- What is their capacity? The ability to quickly scale to meet demand can affect site speed and performance. It can cost you in additional fees if the hosting company isn't prepared. You also need to think ahead if you expect to grow your business in the next few years. Can your host meet your future needs?
- How new are servers and other hardware? You want to make sure they are highly efficient as well to avoid issues with obsolescence.
- What kind of backup systems are in place? Regularly backing up your data keeps it secure. Find out what procedures and processes they follow.



BASELINE CODE WITH ENHANCEMENTS

- Many companies are not aware of all the modifications that have been made over time to the code.
- You'll want to learn what code extensions have been added to the baseline code or incorporated into the overall eCommerce presence. Third-party modules that can be added generally will contain code issues that can affect performance.

BUSINESS REVIEW

- You'll want to conduct a brief overview of your company's eCommerce goals; how the website fits with your strategy; and determine what, if any, unrealized potential exists

TROUBLE TICKET REVIEW

- Discover what problems exist in the environment by looking at currently open issues, plus those that have been recently resolved

BASELINE PERFORMANCE & SPEED TESTING

- A baseline report is very important because it tells what the initial performance of the system is when not under load.
- You'll want to get a view of your web pages as they load. To get a look at speed across multiple contexts and perspectives, it's best to use a customized version of Web Page Test. It provides precise data on the platforms being tested – not just different browsers, but different hardware configurations.

Sidebar: Why Quality Code Commenting Matters

As a retailer, you want an attractive and well-functioning site that makes it easy for you to manage your product and increase orders online. And to get your site working well and looking good, you have to have well-crafted code—the core of every site.

CODE COMMENTING IS LIKE FOOTNOTES

While code is an area of your eCommerce site that you may rarely see, it is something that you should make sure is handled with care, especially when it comes to how people comment the code on your site. Commenting on code is an important practice that gives a great insight to the quality of work going into the code base of a website.

Every programming language from HTML to Javascript to PHP, CSS, Java, and Ruby, allows for code comments. *These bits of information do not affect the functionality of the site in any way, but they do give anyone who looks at the code information about the code they are working with.* This information could be anything from a few words to long paragraphs explaining a complex process (think of footnotes in a technical document). It is meant to be a reminder to the person who programmed it and a guide to those who work on the code after them.

WEBSITE LIFECYCLE: GOOD CODE COMMENTING SAVES TIME

When it comes to the life cycle of a website, it makes sense to take advantage of code commenting. Anyone who's ever worked on a website knows that projects can often be passed around to multiple developers multiple times. The initial build-out phase of a site is usually done by a handful of programmers or more depending on the size of the project, all adding and changing code.

Once the project is complete, it usually moves into a support/maintenance phase where a different team of programmers needs to be able to fix bugs or make new changes or additions to the code. Often times a more complex addition will be requested that the support team cannot complete, and this new addition is completed by another small team of developers. The new addition now needs to be supported by the support team.

GOOD CODE COMMENTING PAYS OFF

Because of the potential for so many different developers to be working on a project, a built-in guide explaining the code that saves new developers from having to figure it out on their own is incredibly helpful. The time-saving benefits, and in turn, cost saving benefits, of utilizing code commenting are also great. The easier it is for each developer to understand how the code is functioning, the less time it will take to debug or add new functionality to it, and the quicker your site is up and ready to drive your sales.

Conclusion

The success of your eCommerce site depends not only on its design and implementation; but also on how well your application and infrastructure work in tandem. Tight collaboration between hosting and support holds the key. That's why we suggest using a single provider for both services.

Good hosting and support also should take a long-term view of your business. Your eCommerce site should not only be fast and secure, but also reliable and scalable as your business grows.

Your relationship with a hosting and support provider should be a partnership. You've retained these services based on their deep technical expertise; but only you are an expert in your business.

If you're looking for world-class hosting and support, LYONSCG can help you understand your options. We operate our own data center, fully-staffed to provide around-the-clock monitoring, on-site maintenance and equipment optimization. Please [contact us](http://www.lyonscg.com/contact/) (<http://www.lyonscg.com/contact/>) to request more information.

Thank You

About LYONSCG

LYONSCG is the industry's premier eCommerce digital agency, serving brand, retail, and B2B organizations with tailored eCommerce solutions that maximize online potential. Headquartered in Chicago, the firm offers a full range of services beginning with digital strategy and digital marketing and extending through experience design, platform implementation, application development, hosting and support. The approach is holistic—to provide every client with a creative, robust and increasingly profitable eCommerce website. LYONSCG is eCommerce Realized!

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