

Chapter 21

Converting Browsers into Buyers

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding conversion rate and Web usability
 - ▶ Increasing customer confidence in your store
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 - ▶ Decreasing load time by slimming down your image files
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First impressions are critical for converting shoppers into buying customers. When new visitors first land on your store pages, your store must look as though you have what they are looking for long enough to keep them from clicking the Back button. Next, your online store must be easy enough to navigate and search so that customers can quickly find what they want.

Your customers might not know exactly what they want, so you must be prepared to help them out with informative articles, product reviews, and buyers' guides that tell them what kinds of products solve their problems. Product pages must sell using words and pictures to create enough interest and direct customers to buy through calls to action in the copy and on the Order buttons. Your store must look credible to instill enough confidence for customers to click the Add To Cart button. Finally, your checkout process must appear safe and secure, be easy enough to use, and focus on the task of completing an order.

In this chapter, I discuss the keys to improving your store's conversion rate and Web usability, show you how to make your store easier to use, and explore some things I've discovered over the past nine years to convert more browsers into buyers!

Getting Shoppers to Buy

Conversion rate is so important, but jumping through all those hoops sounds pretty hairy! Fortunately, it's not that hard. You can make a few simple (but extremely important) changes to your site that will increase your *conversion*

rate. Conversion rate is the percentage of shoppers that visits your Web store and actually places an order. I believe that this is the most important number for most e-commerce businesses to be aware of.

Unfortunately, many merchants don't even track their store's conversion rate, much less attempt to improve it. You have several ways to increase conversion rate, but the easiest is to improve your Web site's *usability*. Web usability is the study of making Web sites easier to use by using established design conventions, making your site load faster, using positive language, communicating clearly, and testing your site with real users.

Increasing your site's traffic is not enough

Getting traffic to your Web site can be a full-time job in itself. After all this traffic gets to your site, you still have to jump over several more hurdles before you get the first order!

First, you have to make sure that your site grabs and holds the attention of your shoppers. Second, you have to do everything in your power to improve your customer conversion machine (your store) before you start spending big bucks to attract more visitors to it. Fixing the "machine" gets you more traffic. So, make your site easier to use by implementing Web usability best practices (which I discuss a little later in this chapter).



Make sure that you're selling something that folks want to buy, and at a competitive price. Check out Chapter 2 for some ideas on business models and how to figure out what else to sell.

Increasing sales by creating quality content

When you make a point of improving the quality of your content, something very cool happens: More and more shoppers are converted to buyers. Adding articles, buyers' guides, product FAQs, additional product pictures, reviews, and so on is like pouring chum into the water when you're going fishing. Customers just eat that stuff up, and the search engines do, too!

Explain which products are good for what, and take an editorial position on them; that is, describe what you like and dislike about certain models. Provide more information about products than what anyone can cut and paste from the manufacturers' sites: a stock product photo and a lame product description. Take additional photos of the product, explain its features, *and* describe how those features solve people's problems. This information is what makes folks want to buy what you sell.

For example, after our dad died, my brother, Steve, became the president of our family business, and Steve was much more willing than my dad ever was to share his expertise and opinions on dog-training gear in public. My brother is, uh, rather opinionated sometimes with online editorials and product reviews, but this works to his advantage because people want to know what real people think about products they are thinking about buying. After Steve began sharing his opinions on the site, sales immediately went up, especially for items with expanded product information or product reviews.

When you add content to your site, you also increase the *stickiness* of your site, or the length of time folks stay on your site. My friend, Internet marketing guru Craig Paddock, says that he sees a direct correlation between the amount of time someone spends on your site and that person's likelihood to convert into a paying customer. This fact alone is an argument in favor of bulking up the product information on your site.

Some folks don't buy on the first visit. It's completely understandable when a brand-new visitor says, "Uh, I just don't think we're ready to Place Order at this point in our relationship. I mean, I just found you on Google two minutes ago. I don't even know you. How about I just Add To My Cart for now?"

Craig Paddock believes in micro-conversions, or steps to conversions. He says that because it often takes many visits to your site before some people buy, your job is to get them one step closer to the Shopping Cart or checkout than they would have taken otherwise. This is the secret to increasing your online sales.



Some folks who visit your site will never buy. Period. This includes those conducting shopping research for purchases to be made offline, tire-kickers, competitors, and irrelevant traffic from weird search-engine queries that are the Internet equivalent of a wrong telephone number. You probably have a lot of unqualified traffic, too, or folks who might be interested in what you sell, but aren't very likely to buy something. These folks will click your paid-search ad just to see what your site sells.

Building Customer Confidence

Instill confidence in shoppers by looking like a professional organization, but at the same time, give your site a human face. It's like what Momma always said: "Just be yourself."

- ✓ **Have a professional-looking site.** Make sure that your information is always current (keep copyrights up to date, eliminate seasonal promotions and special offers that are past due, and so on). Spell-check your site. The only typos you want are for search engines on your "commonly misspelled words page," with links to the real pages. Watch out for any

anti-customer language such as “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone” or anything that sounds as though it were written by a bureaucrat.

- ✔ **Tell me how to reach you.** Provide full contact information. Divulge your physical address, phone numbers, fax number, e-mail address, business hours, and any other pertinent contact data I need to get in touch with you. Look like a real company, not someone hiding behind the anonymity of the Web.
- ✔ **Give me your number.** You need an 800 number displayed prominently on your site. Feature that number on every page, in the Shopping Cart, and all over the checkout pages. Put your phone hours under your 800 number. You might prefer that folks order online, but give them the option to order by phone. Offering customers the option of ordering via your 800 number significantly increases Web conversions because customers feel more secure when they have another way to reach you — even if they never use it.

Also, an 800 number is much better than the other free prefixes (such as 866, 877, or 888) because everyone knows what an 800 number is. Having an 800 number makes your business look more established, too. There aren’t any “fresh” 800 numbers left these days, but if you insist, your telephone service provider will find you someone’s old, discarded number, which will work just great!

- ✔ **Tell me your story.** Write bios of the company’s principals. Write a compelling (but truthful) About Us or company background page.
- ✔ **Show me some pictures.** Provide real photos of you, your employees, your location (your building or shipping warehouse), and even some of your customers if they’ll give you permission (by e-mail is fine). Don’t use clip art or stock photography. Look, you don’t have to be a supermodel to have your photo on the Web. The less slick the photos look, the more real they look.
- ✔ **Be your own company spokesmodel.** If you’re in retail, you’re probably the public face of your company, whether or not you want to admit it. Put your name (and reputation) on your Web site; doing so gives a significant boost to the credibility of your content.
- ✔ **Be small if you’re small.** On the Internet, it’s hard to tell the size of a company by the size or quality of its Web site. Take advantage of the fact that you’re a tiny operation and that customers therefore receive personalized service and support from the owner of the company. It’s okay to admit that you’re a small, one-woman operation because you’ll give a level of attention that someone won’t get shopping at an Amazon.com.

Personally, I don’t want to buy from BigBoxCo, Inc. with 24-hour phone support. I want to buy from someone real who knows what they’re talking about. Someone who will be there *when* I have questions and *if* I have a problem. Someone who cares about me as a customer. I prefer to deal

with the owner so that if I have a problem, I know I'm talking with someone whose house payment depends on keeping me a happy customer.

- ✓ **Prove that you are a legitimate business.** Tell me your history. In the Internet age, the length of time you've been in business says a lot. No one will toot your own horn for you. Tell me about your certifications; that you're licensed, bonded, and insured; and that you've won industry awards for exceptional customer service. List your bibliography of credibility-building articles, books, or speaking engagements.
- ✓ **Collect and publish customer testimonials.** It's pretty cool for you to tell folks how great you are, but when folks who gave you money want to brag on you, let 'em brag. Get permission before using folks' names, but don't be shy about asking. When you get e-mails of praise, reply and simply ask permission to add their name and comments (but not their e-mail address) to your testimonials page. After I get permission, I put their comments online and then e-mail them the URL to make sure that they're happy with how it looks; if they're not, I fix it to their satisfaction like a duck on a June bug. Link to these customer comments pages from your Shopping Cart and checkout where appropriate.

Employ trust symbols

Trust symbols are visual icons or logos representing known institutions that are somehow affiliated with a retailer to verify an online merchant's credibility. Trust symbols work even better when they are linked to independent Web sites and offer independent reviews or complaint resolution. Examples of trust symbols that you pay for one way or another (through dues, fees, percentage of sales, and so on) are industry trade associations (shop.org), shopping sites (Yahoo! Shopping), consumer protection groups (TrustE, BBBonline), and Internet security companies (ScanAlerts's Hackersafe logo, www.scanalert.com).

Some trust symbols that don't cost a thing are credit-card logos such as Visa, MasterCard, Discover, American Express, and PayPal, and you can use these to show accepted payment methods. Show the Y! hosting logo and, as noted previously, Yahoo! Shopping logo. Shipping carrier logos (UPS or FedEx) linked to your shipping info pages work well. Show manufacturer and brand logos on product pages. Display a graphic emphasizing that your checkout is safe and secure through *SSL* (Secure Socket Layer) with 128-bit encryption.

Offer better customer service

Reduce or eliminate risk with a 100% Satisfaction Guarantee. Make returns, exchanges, and canceled orders easy. Have a well-organized Info page with FAQ-style links. Answer e-mails quickly — within one business day, tops. Take the time to write answers to FAQs and put them on the site. Consider an

autoresponder, which is an automated e-mail tool that instantly replies to e-mail questions with links to FAQs when you'll be away from your e-mail for a while. I use www.aweber.com for all my autoresponders. Ask for questions and feedback on the Web site. Offer help everywhere with links to info and privacy pages. Have a simple, understandable privacy policy.

Improve product pages to increase sales

The product page is where the decision to buy occurs. Improvements on the product level give you the best chance to sell more to folks on your site. Get the biggest bang for your buck by spending your time grooming your best-selling products' product pages. Don't distract folks from focusing on the task at hand because of hyperactive navigation. In fact, I like to isolate product pages from site-wide navigation to minimize distractions.

These tips can help you improve your product pages:

- ✔ **Write a compelling headline that gives a benefit.** Turn features into benefits. For example, "This car goes 180 mph, which means that you'll never be late to work again. . . ."
- ✔ **Call it what it is.** Make sure that the Name field contains the exact product name, brand, and model number as well as what everyone else calls it.
- ✔ **Tell me all about it.** Write a unique product description in your Caption field with more information than the manufacturer's product page provides. Link to warranty information and show all accessories and related products.
- ✔ **Make the price bigger.** No, even bigger than that. And red. Have a Sale price and List price (if you discount) because you'll sell more when people know they're saving money.
- ✔ **Show product availability.** Display estimated ship date and delivery time on the product page before customers add a product to their Shopping Cart. Add a quantity field if you sell items commonly bought in bulk. You'll need RTML to do this (see Chapter 26). When something sells out and you can't get it anymore, either delete these extinct items or link to alternative or replacement products, but either way, remove these links from normal section or category pages. Nothing is worse than having a customer wanting to buy something that you can't sell her!
- ✔ **Show more photos, bigger photos, better photos.** Show a picture of the box. Show product details that you couldn't see even if you were in a real store. Make sure that you watermark your name or domain all over these photos, because competitors will steal them. See Chapter 8 for more info on images.
- ✔ **Nothing succeeds like success.** Put the word *Bestseller* in your best-selling products Name field (top 40) for another boost in sales. Shoppers feel more comfortable buying what other folks buy.

- ✔ **Write a Buyer's Guide for each product category.** Write a product *FAQ* (frequently asked questions) list if you get asked many questions about specific products.
- ✔ **Change text on your Buy buttons from Order to Add To Cart.** This is the Order-text setting under Variables in the Store Editor. Add To Cart is much less of a commitment than Order or Buy.
- ✔ **Change the name of the button that links to your Shopping Cart.** The default Show-order-text setting under Variables is Show Order, which I change to Show Shopping Cart or My Shopping Cart.
- ✔ **Make the Add To Cart button really, really, really big.** And red. And place it high on page, preferably on the right side, and above the fold so that folks can see it when they first see the product page without scrolling. You'll need RTML for this, so see Chapter 26 for more info.



This point is so important that it's worth repeating: The product page is where the decision to buy occurs. Make sure that your bestselling product pages put their best face forward with fantastic photography. Craft compelling headlines with a call to action (Order now!) and the benefits of buying. Produce personal, sales-driven copy with well-written product captions that turn features into benefits and motivate browsers to become buyers.

Convert more Shopping Carts

Here's a real-world example using a Yahoo! Store that's been around for at least three years. For every 100 people who visit Merchant X's online store, 5.2 percent of all shoppers click the Add To Cart button and place a product into the Shopping Cart; 4.5 percent of all shoppers start the checkout process; 3.6 percent of all shoppers make it to the second page of checkout (billing page); and 3.1 percent of all shoppers place an order online. Another 1 percent of all shoppers call in to place an order over the phone.

Almost 95 percent of visitors (what Yahoo! calls *customers*, or unique visitors) never even use the Shopping Cart. Ouch! Only around 5 percent of all visitors start a Shopping Cart, with 61 percent of those folks actually placing orders (completed carts). Around 70 percent of folks who start the checkout process actually finish and place an order, which I call a completed cart.

Ultimately, you want to make checking out fast, easy, and stress-free. Make sure that customers can focus on completing the checkout process by eliminating distractions such as external site navigation. Also, the only links to have here are ones that go back to the cart and that continue the checkout process. Make sure that your checkout *branding* (logos) and *look and feel* (colors and fonts) match the look of your store so that no disconnect occurs when customers move from store pages into the checkout process.

Improve your Shopping Carts

Call your cart a Shopping Cart, not a shopping basket or a shopping bag or a shopping bucket. The online Shopping Cart is a well-known Web convention at this point. Virtually everyone knows that e-commerce sites use Shopping Carts, so don't be cute. Here are some tips to get more folks to the Checkout pages:

- ✔ **Place a View Cart button or link prominently on every page.** I prefer to place a Shopping Cart/Checkout icon or link (or both) in the right-uppermost corner of every page.
- ✔ **Make the Proceed To Checkout button big and place it high on the Shopping Cart page.** See Chapter 14 for more on the new Checkout Manager. I like to minimize the branding and navigation that appears above the cart's contents to pull up that Proceed To Checkout button.
- ✔ **Make the Keep Shopping button or link go back to the previous product page.** By default, the Yahoo! Store's Keep Shopping link takes customers back to the previous product page unless you change the variable Continue-url. Don't change this unless you have a very good reason.
- ✔ **In the Shopping Cart, tell customers how to do three things: keep shopping, edit the contents of their cart, or check out.** Show your 800 number and phone hours. Push your 100% Satisfaction Guarantee. Link to your `info.html` page for contact information. Push the free shipping offer.

Talk about shipping and delivery on the Shipping Info Checkout page

Tell customers that you have their stuff (Availability), what company you'll ship it through (Shipping Options), and how fast they'll get their stuff (Delivery Time). Push free shipping or other shipping promotions. Here's more on what to show on the Shipping Info Checkout page:

- ✔ **Display all shipping charges before checkout to reduce the number of abandoned carts.** Show shipping prices on the product page if you can. Estimate ship date and delivery time.
- ✔ **Make your shipping rates easy to understand.** I like having a free shipping promotion on all domestic (US48) orders above a certain dollar amount (usually my average sale), and flat-rate shipping for all other domestic orders, which covers 95 percent of your orders. I have separate shipping rates for bulky items, express delivery, Alaska/Hawaii/Puerto Rico, APO, and Canada.
- ✔ **Free shipping works great if you can afford it.** Make free shipping an incentive to increase order size. Push FREE SHIPPING on every page and in title tags and abstracts for items that qualify.
- ✔ **Remove unnecessary data fields on the checkout forms.** Don't collect any info you don't need. See Chapter 14 on how to remove unnecessary fields and clean up your store's checkout.

- ✔ **Use a Progress Indicator graphic.** This graphic says, “You are here. Here’s what’s left to do to place an order,” and it is now provided in the new Checkout Manager (Chapter 14). Back in the good ol’ days (2005 and earlier), we had to make our checkout progress indicators by hand and we liked it that way.
- ✔ **Link to shipping information pages.** Links to helpful info pages, policy pages, express shipping options, and international info should open in pop-ups or new windows to avoid taking the customer out of the checkout path.
- ✔ **If you must use coupon codes in your checkout (please don’t), rename the coupon code field something else (such as Source-code).** This way, the 95 percent of customers who don’t have coupons won’t feel like they’re getting screwed because they *don’t* have a coupon. Trust me. Your conversion rate will thank you.
- ✔ **Provide links to contact information.** Show your 800 number with phone hours and other contact info. Link to Cart Help pages.

Talk about safety, security, and privacy on the Billing Info Checkout page

Tell shoppers that they are on a secure server and that their personal information is safe and secure. Assure customers that their satisfaction is completely guaranteed (if you do that). Display or link to pages with testimonials from satisfied customers. Here are more ways to make your customer feel comfortable buying from you:

- ✔ **Link to other ways to order or pay.** Link to a fax or mail-order PDF order form if you can accept those types of orders.
- ✔ **Emphasize privacy when you ask for customers’ e-mail.** Tell them you’ll safeguard their personal information, and that you don’t spam.
- ✔ **Accept a variety of payment methods.** Accept four major credit cards (Visa, MasterCard, Discover, and American Express) plus PayPal, and show their logos on-site. Consider taking online checks, too. I like to put a GIF file with these trust symbols in the Variable Final-text field.

Improving Your Store’s Usability to Increase Conversions

Improving the usability of your Yahoo! Store is one of the most effective things you can do to increase your conversion rate, and thus your sales. Achieving this usability includes perhaps boring but definitely important

stuff such as increasing the load speed of your store; optimizing and reducing image files to make them load faster; designing your store to display correctly on the browsers and monitors that the majority of folks visiting your site are using; writing copy in a Web-friendly style; using established Web-design conventions; and more.



Web usability isn't a magic bullet! Just because you make your site easier to use doesn't mean that you will sell anything. Shoppers will jump through hoops of fire and shop in the world's worst online store if it's the only place that sells what they want to buy. The opposite is true, too! If your prices are too high, your site looks amateurish or shady, your shipping rates and policies are hard to find or nonexistent, your returns and exchanges policies are draconian, or you're selling something that no one wants to buy in the first place, *no matter how much you improve the usability of your site, no one is ever going to buy from you!*

Here are some ways to improve your Yahoo! Store's usability and (I hope!) your conversion rate:

- ✓ **Follow well-established Web-design conventions.** Blue underlined links look like links. Buttons look clickable when they look three-dimensional and raised off the page. Pages less than 800 pixels wide mean no horizontal scrolling. Intrusive pop-ups get blocked by browsers or run folks off your site.
- ✓ **Use better error pages.** Make a custom 404 error page that pops up when a page cannot be found with a site search box, links to popular pages, and uses a friendly "Whoops! Page not found but it's not your fault" tone. (See Chapter 15.)
- ✓ **Watch others use your site.** Find a newbie. Get "civilians" to surf the site and have a specific tasks such as finding a type of product with a specific feature, or finding a product that will solve a particular problem and is priced below a certain point. Watch what users do, not just what they say — but do get them to verbalize their thought process as they click around.
- ✓ **Ask customers for feedback about your site design on your Web site.** Put a Feedback link in the Final-text field.

Understanding how little time you have

Jakob Nielsen (www.useit.com) is best known as the father of *Web usability*, which is the study of how people use the Internet and how to make Web sites easier to use. Nielsen's research says that you have about 10 seconds before the average user starts to give up on a slow-loading page and clicks the Back button. Other research shows that the average dialup user waits an average of 30 seconds for each new Web page he or she views.

There's a big difference between 10 seconds on a super-fast DSL or cable modem and 10 seconds on a bad dialup connection. Ten seconds on a modem gets you anywhere from 34K to 50K worth of files, depending on everything from modem speed to where the files actually are on the Internet. Ten seconds on a broadband connection gets you anything from 250K on up.

Fortunately, you are probably a typical e-commerce retailer and your target customer base mirrors most of America, with about half the users on high-speed Internet connections with DSL or cable modems and the other half on telephone dialup. This means that some of your users need faster-loading Web pages than others because the faster your page loads, the more pages the average visitor will view. The more pages visitors view, the more they will buy.



A fast-loading Web page is never a bad thing, even if someone is on a high-speed Internet connection. There is a direct relationship between fast-loading Web pages and higher conversion rates.

Revving up your site's load speed

Load speed is the first critical function of your Web site. Remember that if a page doesn't load within 10 seconds, it doesn't matter how cool your site is; you will lose some customers. One client's sales jumped up tens of thousands of dollars the first month after I put his site on a "diet." I decreased his thumbnails to make the section pages load faster, and I actually increased the size of his product images. The slow load was causing customers to bail before having a chance to order.

Think 50K file as a maximum file size for a Web page and all its elements. This maximum gives you about 10KB for your HTML file (compressed) and 40K for images. With a section page, this gives you ten 4KB thumbnails or twenty 2K thumbnails.

Use HTML or text over graphics. HTML text downloads faster because HTML code files weigh much, much less than image files, and search engines can read the text. For example, the headlines created on the Yahoo! Store product pages are actually images, or pictures of words, not words themselves. These image files are small but at least ten times the file size of the same text in HTML.

Your biggest problem: Images

Images are the main culprit when it comes to load speed. Here are some solutions to common problems with images:

- ✓ **Compressing individual image files works wonders.** For example, an uncompressed photograph for a product image can result in an 80K JPEG file, which is way too big! Compressed, that photo is a 20K file.

The slightest amount of compression can vastly reduce file sizes, so make sure that you adjust your compression settings in your graphics software. I set my JPEG compression to 15 percent, and I reduce my GIF files to 16 colors with no dithering. Adobe Photoshop and Corel's Paint Shop Pro both have compression wizards. You can always use an online tool such as those found at www.jpegwizard.com or www.321webmaster.com/optigif.php if you prefer.

- ✔ **Reduce the number of images on a page to increase load speed.** Usually, the problem with images is that the file size of all the images put together is too large. The easiest way to speed up image load speed on a Yahoo! Store is to have fewer items in section pages (up to 20 products per section, maximum). For example, 40 thumbnails of product shots on a section page load very slowly! My average thumbnail icon is usually about 3.5K.
- ✔ **Use smaller thumbnail images (closer to 45 x 45 pixels than 125 x 125 pixels).** In the Store Editor under the Variables settings, change Thumb-height to 55 and Thumb-width to 55 and click the Update button. Now see how your thumbnails look by browsing your most popular section pages.

Multiply the number of thumbnails you have by the Variables Thumb-height and Thumb-width to get a rough guess at the weight of those graphic images based upon pixels. For example, if you have 45-x-45-pixel thumbnails, you can have up to 20 products in a section. Twenty thumbnails x 45 pixels x 45 pixels = 40,500 pixels.

- ✔ **Optimize your Icons for faster-loading thumbnail images.** The best way to reduce the load time of section or category page is to crunch the stuffing out of a 45-x-45-pixel GIF file. Don't get stuck with a big, fat 5KB autogenerated thumbnail. Take that image, compress it to 2 or 3KB, and upload that to the Icon image property. If you want to get the biggest bang for your buck, maximize your top 20 section pages.
- ✔ **Save images in a Web-friendly format and file size.** When you create or edit your images in a graphics program, save photographs as JPEGs and save graphics such as logos as GIF files. I aim to make any custom icons (thumbnails) no larger than 2K. Product photos should be less than 30K, and preferably 20K.
- ✔ **Formatting images helps.** Crop product photos on a white background to remove white space around the image.
- ✔ **Recycling images works, too.** I've been guilty of this: using one logo on the home page, a slightly different one in the footer of every page, and yet another version of my logo on my info pages. What a waste of bandwidth! Now I use the same logo across the site. When users visit a second page that contains that logo, the image is already on their hard drive and it doesn't have to be downloaded again.

When you have an image-heavy navigation scheme, remember that these images have to be downloaded only once. Reuse persistent navigation and other elements (Search button, Add To Cart button, Info graphic, and so on) on other pages.

Don't use big images below the fold. Almost half of Web users won't scroll down even on Web pages that are longer than their browsers are tall. If an image doesn't show in the first screen shot (above the fold), then don't have an image there.

Everything depends on access speed

Speed is everything. Fifteen years ago, I accessed Usenet newsgroups with a 1200/2400-baud modem that let me read the words a letter at a time on the screen as files downloaded. Ten years ago, 28.8K modems were the standard. Five years ago, everyone had upgraded to 56K modems, and DSL and cable were first coming online. Now, half the country is using broadband at home with speeds anywhere from 256KB to 3 megabits, with folks living in the boonies (like me) stuck on dialup or satellite. Today, people access the Web at many, many different speeds.

A user's Internet access speed determines how long it takes for an HTML page and all the images and other elements on that page to download and display in a browser. The faster a user's Internet access speed, the less time it takes for a page to load. The faster the load speed of a page, the better the experience will be for your average shopper. Better shopping experiences turn into sales. Slow-loading pages are extremely frustrating, and after 10 seconds, most folks give up.

You may have no control over the speed of your visitors' Internet access, but you have total control over the size of your Web pages, how many images you display on a page, and the file size of each image. If you want to sell to only 50 percent of the population, don't worry about the file sizes of your images and HTML pages. For my part, I'd rather have a shot at every dollar.

Looking at Who's Looking at You

Read on as I share some demographic information from one of my higher-traffic Yahoo! Stores. Besides telling you what pages were the most popular, what keywords converted into sales, and where all this traffic is coming from, most third-party analytics software also collects demographic information. This includes the browser, browser version, and monitor resolution settings of all your visitors.

Operating system and browser software

Depending on your customer mix, most users (95.5 percent) will be using some version of Windows. Less than 5 percent will be using a Macintosh or the Linux operating system. If you sell to early adopters, designers, musicians, or anyone else who fits the Macintosh profile, you need to make sure that your site looks good on a Mac, too.

You need to know the types of browsers that visitors use to look at your Web store. Web sites display somewhat differently (and sometimes very differently) in different browsers.

Most people surfing the Internet today use Microsoft's Internet Explorer (IE). I prefer Firefox for surfing the Internet, but when I'm building a Yahoo! Store, I like to see what the vast majority of my customers will see, so I use Internet Explorer.

Screen resolution in pixels

A Web page of an online catalog is very different from the printed page of the mail-order catalog. With print, you have absolute control over how the shopper sees your catalog page. You make the images and text fill up the page with a pleasing design. On the Web, you have some control, but visitors will see different-looking catalogs depending on their browser settings and monitor's *screen resolution* (how many pixels tall and pixels wide a monitor displays).

Most monitors can display multiple settings. The higher the settings, the smaller everything appears. You've probably seen the super-geek's computer with a 23-inch monitor whose screen resolution setting is so high that you can't read the text, and Web pages appear the size of postage stamps.

In July 2005, the most popular screen resolution on one of my sites was 1,024 x 768 (favored by 54 percent of users). In a very distant second place was 800 x 600 (22 percent). This means that if you design a store that's around 800 pixels wide (or just a little smaller), it will look good on more than 99 percent of the users looking at your Web site, which is good enough for me!

By default, Yahoo! Stores have an absolute width, meaning that if you're looking at a 790-pixel-wide store on a 50-inch plasma monitor, it might look a little small. Most folks don't surf the Web on a 50-inch plasma monitor but rather on a regular old CRT monitor set to 1,024 x 768. Make sure that you design your store to look good on the average shopper's monitor!

Free speed test

Use this free speed test on your pages to see the total load time of any Web page. The Results page tells you the file size (weight) of all the elements on the page including scripts and images, gives you links to them in descending order by file size, and then gives you some helpful tips based upon your results. You can find it here:

[www.websiteoptimization.com/
services/analyze](http://www.websiteoptimization.com/services/analyze)

It's fun! Run your competitor's pages through the tool either for laughs or a wake-up call, depending on how fast they are. My top five competitors' home pages weighed in at 265K, 252K, 182K, 165K, and 73K. I weighed in at 51K. Zoom, zoom!

So, how big can your pages be?

There's a very delicate balancing act between using pretty pictures and determining how patient visitors can be to wait for images to download. There are three types of files: the HTML page itself, site-wide navigation/branding images, and page-specific product images.

You don't have much control over the file size of your HTML pages. The file really has to be as big as it needs to be. You can cut down a little on file size by doing a couple of things: moving some code off the page by externalizing some files such as JavaScripts, and moving some formatting off the page by using cascading style sheets (CSS).

Yahoo! seems to be compressing HTML files on its servers. This is a fancy way to increase the load speed of a page by compressing the HTML file into a Zip file that the browsers can read. My home page on one site weighed in at 79K, but after I looked at the file with the download speed analysis tool, I found that it weighed in at just over 55K.

Focus on what makes money

While most of my ad agency-based Web-development friends were mastering all the ins and outs of the latest version of Flash and Photoshop to make sexy Web pages, I made the very conscious decision not to. Instead, I focused on discovering how to make my sites convert better and how to drive more and more traffic through search-engine marketing to my very profitable, but not quite as flashy, Web stores.

I'll admit that sometimes I feel as though I'm searching for the magic bullet for improving my conversion rate. If I could only find that one magical phrase (100% Satisfaction Guaranteed) that keeps folks from dropping their Shopping Carts and bailing out of the checkout process, I'd be rich! If it were only that simple!

The truth is that all these little things add up to increasing your conversion rate. It's not just one thing. As you make changes to your store, document what you do, and make changes slowly to see what the impact is over time. Every site is different, so techniques that work on one site may not work for another site. Some changes may decrease sales and conversions, so watch out!

Conversion and usability resources

Check out these resources for more information on increasing your sales:

- ✓ **GrokDotcom** (www.grokdot.com): This conversion-rate marketing newsletter is from Future Now, written by the Eisenberg Brothers.
- ✓ **Jakob Nielsen's Web site** (www.useit.com): This site features Jakob Nielsen's weekly Alertbox column, "Web usability, usability engineering, and Jakob's minimalist approach to Web design."
- ✓ ***Designing Web Usability***, by Jakob Nielsen (New Riders Publishing, 1999): This book is the Bible of Web Usability and is worth every penny of the \$45.00 list price, but you can get it on Amazon for \$30.98. Buy his other books, too!