

## osCommerce Review

osCommerce is a powerful open source solution to your ecommerce or shopping cart needs. osCommerce is free, easy, fully functional "out of the box", and setting up and maintaining a store is simple and efficient.

Introduction by Geoff Ford, Attitude Group Ltd - Christchurch, New Zealand.

## Introduction

Prior to discovering osCommerce, when a client asked me about building an ecommerce site I would weigh up various options.

- **Developing a solution from the ground up** meant a lot of work and would often push the cost up to something that was prohibitive for many businesses.
- **Installing a shopping cart product** with a set list of features would mean there was no flexibility to change the system if the client's requirements changed.
- **Adapting one of the freely available shopping cart options** could provide a good base to build on. However, most often these systems were not being developed in an organized, ongoing way and they lacked a community of users and developers that could offer support.

Discovering osCommerce, I found a system that had the features ready for most online stores that could be customized for each customer's requirements, and was being developed and improved by the core developers and community of osCommerce users.

**Because osCommerce is free to download and use, many businesses can afford to develop and operate a shopping site.**

Attitude is a company that installs, supports and customizes osCommerce for businesses around the world. I found osCommerce fitted my needs as a developer and it has met the needs of my clients in the United States, the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

This review outlines how both customers and merchants experience osCommerce. It doesn't evaluate osCommerce against every other possible option, but provides information about key aspects of the software. Reading it will give you an overview of what you can expect from osCommerce.

## Attitude's osCommerce Business Series

*osc\_review.pdf*

Download from:  
<http://www.oscommerce.co.nz/docs/>

**For osCommerce installation,  
customization and support, contact  
Attitude.**

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# The Customer's Perspective

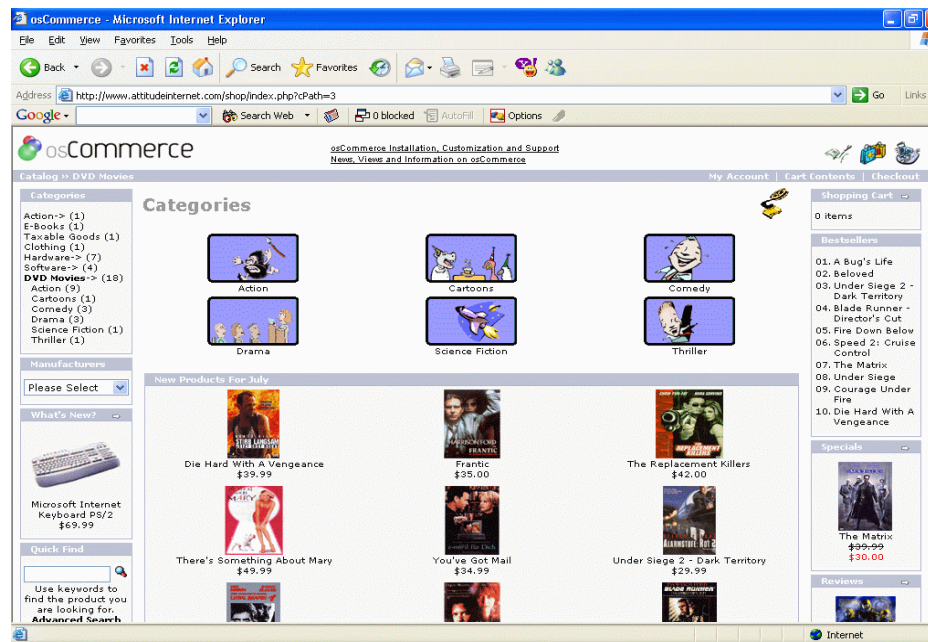
## How osCommerce works to create a positive shopping experience

When a visitor arrives at your store they are primarily interested in an **easy** and **secure** way to shop and purchase. osCommerce is designed with these interests in mind. osCommerce produces:

- user friendly stores with intuitive navigation
- a convenient shopping cart model
- a secure shopping cart model

**These three aspects work in harmony to provide customers with a hassle free shopping experience.**

osCommerce provides **highly visible and easily accessible product catalogs** that allow customers to naturally and conveniently navigate towards the products that interest them. There are multiple ways provided for the customer to search and browse your catalog and find relevant products. The software can also provide suggestions about related products and can automatically inform them of new products.



Shopping cart software like osCommerce allows the customer to browse freely within the store, adding and removing products at will until they make their final selection. They can then proceed to the checkout and pay for products. This is a popular and natural system that enhances a shopper's experience as they do not feel "locked into" purchasing a product and are more likely to freely browse the store.

osCommerce allows secure purchasing using SSL (Secure Sockets Layer) to encrypt information between the customer and the vendor. This protects valuable customer information such as their credit card details, and makes them feel more comfortable purchasing from your store.

osCommerce features a customer account system, which means that customer contact details are remembered for subsequent purchases. This makes it easier to make a repeat purchase, review previous orders, view order status and keep contact information up to date.

**Customers appreciate tools that make it easy to shop and to track past purchases.**

- **Purchases can be reviewed by customers** so that they can track and monitor the status of their orders. Information regarding processing and shipping can be displayed and osCommerce can send an email to a customer whenever the status of one of their purchases changes.
- **Customers can view the status of each order.** The software provides the customer with detailed information regarding their order, including whether their order has been processed or shipped.
- **Customers have access to their full history of purchases,** allowing them to track back through their past purchases.
- Customers can register to receive **email notification of product updates** relevant to them.
- A **product review feature** allows customers to review products and read the reviews of other shoppers.

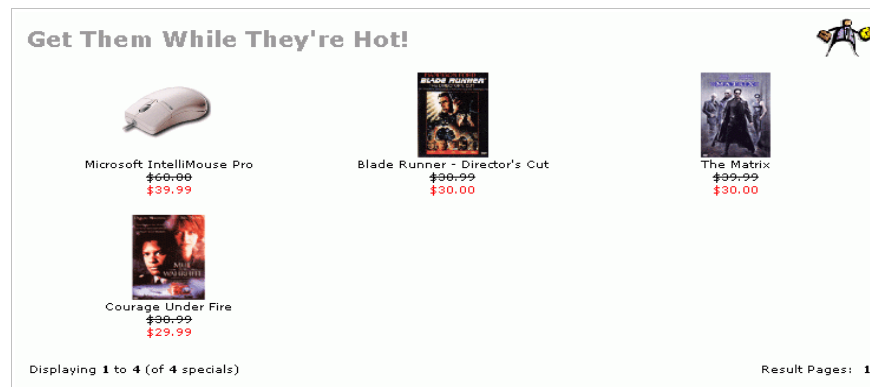
# The Merchant's Perspective Part 1

How osCommerce works so you can sell effectively online.

## Ways to Effectively Sell Online

osCommerce features a number of useful tools that allow you to more effectively communicate with and sell to your customers. Some of these features include:

- **Building Customer Relationships:** The account system allows store owners to build and maintain customer contact, view purchase histories, and generate reports about which customers purchase the most goods.
- **Email Newsletter:** Communicating with shoppers is essential, and osCommerce provides an efficient method for periodic communications with registered users of your store. The newsletter system allows vendors to compose a newsletter regarding news related to the store, new products, discounted products, and other matters of interest. These can then be sent out to all registered shoppers. This is highly effective as the newsletter is only sent to interested shoppers who have registered to receive such information. The newsletter system also allows the merchant to email customers who have expressed interest in particular products.
- **Product Specials:** It is possible to discount products and display product specials randomly on every page. There is also a specials page that lists all products currently on special.



- **Suggestions of Related Products:** When viewing product information, relevant products are displayed based on previous customers' purchases. The software suggests products based on other customers' purchases.



- **"What's New":** The What's New feature allows the vendor to automatically display new products to customers when they enter the site. This ensures that exciting new products easily get the attention and publicity they deserve.
- **Reviews:** Customers like to be reassured that the products a vendor is selling are as good as the vendor suggests they are. A useful method to assure customers of this is the use of previous customers' reviews. Customers' reviews of a certain product can be displayed alongside the product description.
- **Tell-a-friend:** The site allows customers to easily email friends about a particular product, allowing them to spread the word about your site and products.

## The Merchant's Perspective Part 2

It is important to ensure that any visitor to your online shop is met with an intuitive and easy to use environment. It is equally important that you, the vendor, uses a similarly user friendly and constructive system to administer and control the shop.

### Administering Your Shopping Cart

The day-to-day administration of osCommerce orders is simple and largely intuitive. Once authorized, the vendor has a free hand to set up, modify and organize the store to their liking.

### Shopping Cart Configuration

Configuration of the cart can be separated from cart administration. The configuration side of osCommerce can take more effort to learn, but you're less likely to perform it frequently. This is because configuration tends to happen only on initial setup or if something major, like shipping costs, is being changed. This means the actual day-to-day administration of your shopping cart is relatively easy.

The screenshot displays the osCommerce Administration interface. At the top, the osCommerce logo is on the left, and navigation links for Administration, Online Catalog, and Support Site are on the right. A language dropdown menu is set to English. The main content area is titled "Choose an action.." and features several categorized options:

- osCommerce**: Support Site, Support Forums, Mailing Lists, Bug Reports, FAQ, Live Discussions, CVS Repository, Information Portal
- Orders**: Pending: 68, Processing: 0, Delivered: 0, Phone/Mail Order: 3
- Statistics**: Customers: 787, Products: 32, Reviews: 4
- Security**: You are not protected by a secure SSL connection.
- Configuration**: My Store, Logging, Cache
- Modules**: Payment, Shipping
- Catalog**: Contents, Manufacturers
- Locations / Taxes**: Countries, Tax Zones
- Customers**: Customers, Orders
- Localization**: Currencies, Languages
- Reports**: Products, Orders
- Tools**: Backup, Banners, Files

Some of the capabilities osCommerce provides the vendor include:

- Ability to **update customer records**.
- Ability to **view and update order status**. The status of orders can be changed, from 'pending' to 'delivered' for example, and comments can be added. The status and comments associated with an order can be optionally emailed to the customer directly from the Administration area or made viewable in the customer's My Account area.
- **Control over** the addition, removal and modification of **categories, products, manufacturers, customers, and product reviews**.
- **Control over the shop's catalog structure**.
- Systems for reviewing **reports on both customers and their purchases**.
- Ability to add and **control product attributes**, for example allowing customers to choose colors and sizes.
- Systems to cope with **tax zones, classes, and rates**.
- **Control over how shipping costs are calculated** for each purchase. Modules that are installed by default with osCommerce allow shipping charges to be calculated based on the number of items purchased, by weight, or as a flat rate. It is also possible to specify different rates for different geographic locations. Support exists for the US postal service, UPS and Federal Express. There are many shipping modules available on the osCommerce site.
- **Control over the way payments are processed**. Multiple payment methods can be installed, giving customers a choice of payment options. Modules that come preinstalled with osCommerce provide support for AuthorizeNet, Paypal, Secpay, Worldpay and other major realtime credit card processors. Modules also exist to receive credit card data for offline processing and to provide support for payment by Money Order or Check. In addition to this there is a large and growing number of payment module contributions available on the osCommerce site.
- **Support for multi-currency shops** and the ability to update exchange rates manually or via connection to currency exchange rate servers.
- **Support for multi-language sites**. Language support is available for English, German, and Spanish. More languages are available from the osCommerce site.
- **Backup tools** to safeguard the store's data from computer failures.

## Strengths of osCommerce Explored

The capabilities of osCommerce are not limited to those discussed in the sections on Customer Perspective and Merchant Perspective. One of the key strengths of osCommerce is that it is an open source ecommerce solution, which is served by a thriving community of developers and users. This community not only works towards an ever improving ecommerce system, but also towards enhanced and expanded functionality that empowers and extends osCommerce even more. These enhancements provide additional key strengths, as osCommerce continually increases your ability to customize and expand your store.

This section examines osCommerce's three key strengths: it is open source, customizable and expandable.

### 1. Open Source Shopping Cart

One of the important strengths of osCommerce is that it is an **open source** shopping cart. This has a number of important implications.

Firstly, open source software costs nothing to buy. Open source software is freely distributed by the authors to whoever wishes a copy of the product. osCommerce can be downloaded for free by anyone from the osCommerce website at <http://www.oscommerce.com/solutions/downloads>. There will be costs (either your time or developer fees) related to installation, support and customization, but the software itself is free.

The second major benefit of open source software is that the software code can be modified; that is, anyone technically capable can examine the software code and improve or modify it as they see fit. According to the Open Source Initiative (<http://www.opensource.org/>), when people have access to programs like this it leads to a situation where:

“people improve it, people adapt it, people fix bugs [problems]. And this can happen at a speed that, if one is used to the slow pace of conventional software development, seems astonishing.”

For osCommerce this leads to **two great advantages**.

**There is a huge community of people devoted to improving and developing osCommerce**, and anyone with the technical ability is welcome to provide improvements and expand osCommerce. This community has seen the resolution of hundreds of bugs and the implementation of many exciting and useful enhancements, making osCommerce a stable and feature-laden software package for selling online.

The open nature of osCommerce's source code also allows for a great deal of **customization**, and also allows for integration of other open source code. Both of these strengths will be expanded upon elsewhere.

*For more information on open source and osCommerce visit <http://www.oscommerce.com>, or for further information on open source software in general see the Open Source Initiative at <http://www.opensource.org/>.*

## 2. Customizable Shopping Cart

**A major benefit of choosing osCommerce is that it can be customized to meet your specific needs.**

Every shopping site is unique and has different requirements. Many businesses will find that the feature-set osCommerce provides surpasses their requirements. Others will want changes made so they can:

- improve the ease with which customers interact with the site
- add features that make the site sell more effectively
- distinguish their site from competitors' sites
- save time and money in administering the site
- integrate osCommerce with other software or with a larger site

Whatever your requirements, the open source nature of osCommerce means the software can be customized to fit.

Since there is a large community of osCommerce users, it is often possible to save time and money by using or extending the work of other osCommerce users.

Developers who have experience with osCommerce, like Attitude, can provide specialist osCommerce customization to fit your needs.

## 3. Expandable Shopping Cart

One of the main strengths of osCommerce revolves around community developed contributions that

- save time and money when developing your site
- allow you to benefit from new features and ideas

The osCommerce website describes contributions as developments "... provided by the community which are in the form of project add-ons, feature updates, language packs, and extended modules."

osCommerce contributions are designed to be easily slotted into an existing osCommerce installation and provide specific enhancements or capabilities.

Currently there are around 3000 community made contributions available for download from the osCommerce website that either expand or enhance the base osCommerce product.



Many of the contributions center on expanding the capabilities and usability of osCommerce. For example, some contributions allow for the store to be connected to new payment systems. Others concentrate on the delivery side of the business. For example, osCommerce shipping modules calculate shipping costs for a particular country's postal system.

There are also contributions that help the merchant to administer their site (for example making it easier to update product prices) or to sell more effectively to their customers (for example customer wish lists within your store, or the ability to create and operate an affiliate scheme). Remember that not all contributions are created equal, and a developer or the osCommerce forums can often provide a valuable check on the quality of a contribution.

#### **Examples of Common Changes**

- Add gift voucher systems
- Allow customers to purchase without an account
- Disable reviews
- Add wish lists
- Set up affiliate schemes
- Provide facilities for wholesalers
- Add category descriptions
- Add facilities for bulk management of products and orders

## Customizing the osCommerce Template

A difficulty sometimes faced by users of osCommerce relates to the system used by osCommerce to lay out and arrange the store. **osCommerce is currently not a template driven system**, and this sometimes makes changing the layout of the store somewhat lengthy if complicated changes from the base look of the site are required.

Having said this, osCommerce effectively allows quick changes to the look of the site by altering the **shared header, footer, and left and right column** files. These can be easily and quickly updated and the change is reflected through all pages. It is also possible to **quickly change the styles and colors** on the site by using the site-wide cascading stylesheet. These methods provide a fast way to change the look of an osCommerce site.

The next released version of osCommerce will feature a more flexible system for modifying the template.

## Weighing up the Options

Everyone's requirements are different for an ecommerce site. The options can be broadly classified as follows...

### Developing a ground-up solution

Lots of work and the costs can be prohibitive. Initially custom built sites seem like a smart move because you can get 'exactly what you want', but there is a large setup cost, a long wait until the site is launched, and there are often periods of trial and error. There are also high development and maintenance costs, and it can be difficult to change web developers.

### Installing a fixed shopping cart product

Buying a commercial cart package often gives you access to ongoing support. However, the set list of features often may not allow enough flexibility for the system to change to meet individual and ongoing customer requirements.

### Adapting a freely available shopping cart option

This can provide a good base to build on. The best of these systems should be developed in an organized, ongoing way and allow a mechanism for adequate support. osCommerce fits into this category.

osCommerce caters for a broad range of scenarios. If you already have a reasonable grasp on computer coding or have the time to learn, you can use the osCommerce software and support community to construct the entire site yourself. Alternatively, if you are happy to pay for a complete ecommerce solution you can hire a web developer to customize osCommerce to your requirements. Like any option, osCommerce has both advantages and disadvantages.

## Disadvantages of osCommerce

### **No inbuilt way to password protect the administration area of osCommerce**

There is no inbuilt way to password protect the administration area. There are a number of easy enough ways to do this, but they aren't supplied in the default installation of osCommerce. Information on about password protection can be found on the osCommerce site, or you can discuss it with whoever installs your cart.

### **osCommerce is not template driven**

Although osCommerce is not template driven, there are stylesheets and you can also quickly change the shared header, footer, left and right column files. Even so, changing how the site looks may not be as fast/flexible in osCommerce as in a template driven solution.

### **Customization without a developer may be slow**

If customization is required and you don't use a developer, it can take time to make changes to code. While this is true, you don't have to do your own customization. It is cost effective to use or extend the work of other osCommerce users, or to find a developer who has experience with osCommerce, like Attitude.

### **The attribute system**

osCommerce has a limited attributes system. For example, by default there is no stock control on attributes and no SKU (Stock Keeping Unit) identifiers. If you are heavily reliant on attributes, you may need to seriously look at modification or consider using another cart system.

### **Limitations of large product catalogs**

Large product catalogs (perhaps over a few hundred products) will require modules for the input/management of data if product information is changing frequently. A catalog of over a few hundred products may need modification to elements of product administration, and very large catalogs (maybe ten thousand products, depending on the server) may need modifications so they can be searched and browsed effectively.

## Advantages of osCommerce

### **Trusted**

osCommerce is well known and widely used. It has a large support community and a long history behind it.

### **Cost effective**

Open source software is free to download and use, and existing code/contributions are also free.

### **Easy to use**

The software features a familiar shopping cart model, with a number of ways to access the product catalog.

### **Suitable for a wide range of stores**

Clients can choose whether to build/modify their own site or use an experienced developer, and the software suits a wide range of store types. In addition, osCommerce supports international stores, as it includes facilities for multi-language and multi-currency shops.

### **Flexible**

osCommerce is customizable and expandable by someone with the right skills or the desire to learn.

### **Secure**

The software allows the use of Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) encryption. Other features in the Administration area allow greater precautions.

### **Well supported**

There is a strong community of osCommerce users and developers.

### **Increases effective selling**

There are several ways osCommerce optimizes selling. For example, it allows product catalogs that can be browsed and searched, product specials, reviews, newsletters, as well as the Related Products feature and the What's New feature.

### **Facilitates promotion of customer base**

osCommerce helps merchants build up a customer base by being customer focused and easy to use, and by providing extras such as reviews, newsletters, and the Email a Friend feature.

### **Customer focused**

Customers find osCommerce easy to use. They can receive newsletters and email notifications about products, and they can read and create online product reviews. Customers also appreciate the secure accounts that protect their personal data, allow access to their purchase history, and provide updates on the status of their orders.

### **Merchant focused**

osCommerce is an affordable option for merchants and it caters for a wide range of languages, currencies and store sizes. It provides a wide range of features, including report generation, payment processing and backup tools, as well as invoices and packing slips. osCommerce features a straightforward administration area that is easy to secure, and merchants have control of catalog content and structures, products, and shipping cost calculations.



## Final Comments

osCommerce is a feature-laden product, allowing many businesses to get online in an affordable way. Like most software, it does have limitations and potential you should be aware of.

There are a variety of ways you can examine osCommerce before making a decision about the software:

- **Look at online demonstrations** at <http://www.oscommerce.co.nz/oscommerce-demonstration.html>
- **Read feedback** in osCommerce forums and other sites on ecommerce
- **Talk to a developer**

**Thanks for taking the time to read this review of osCommerce. We hope you have found it useful. If you want to sell online with osCommerce, please consider Attitude Group Ltd as your partner.**

Attitude has specialist expertise installing and customizing osCommerce.

**Contact Attitude on the web at [http://www.attitude.net.nz/oscommerce\\_support.html](http://www.attitude.net.nz/oscommerce_support.html).**

## Legal Stuff

This review is designed to be an introduction for people who want an overview of the key aspects of osCommerce software. We urge all readers to decide for themselves whether osCommerce is right for their business.

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