

In the last article, I offered you some ideas about whether to carry your own products or services, or whether you might consider third-party sales to make a profit with your Web site. In this article, I'll look at some shopping cart sites to consider what makes some shopping sites work. Is the site successful because of its slick design, the "buzz" about its product or service, the great shopping cart program, or is it because some people just seem to have all the luck? In the article below, I'll take you to sites that use five different shopping carts to understand what works for some and what may work for you...

Shopping Carts: Design-Wise Selling

Programming knowledge is essential to build a shopping cart or an online store, but even a programming klutz like me can understand simple systems like [PayPal](#). However, what if I wanted to become more sophisticated with my sales approach? Which shopping cart program would I use? I could use free programs like Agora Cart, or I should spend a little cash for what appears to be "plug and play" programs? In an effort to understand the program that I might want to use, I did a search in Google. When I typed the words, "shopping cart" into the Google search engine, the following five businesses showed up on the first page in this order:

[ShopFactory](#) – The ShopFactory maintains three shopping cart options available, all for under \$400. They tout their product as a "plug and play" easy-to-use program even for beginners.

[AgoraCart](#) – Available for free as an Open Source based e-commerce solution released under the GNU General Public License. "Originally targeting highly experienced webmasters and programmers, it has since matured to a solution that is easier to setup for beginners, powerful enough for experienced programmers, modular for flexibility, and one that is currently powering thousands live shops around the world." Annual memberships cost money.

[X-Cart](#) – An e-commerce solution for under \$200. Right up front, X-Cart states that their product is designed for "Software developers looking for a quality PHP shopping cart program at a low price." They have other caveats that I'll cover in a bit...

[osCommerce](#) (Open Source) – Another e-commerce solution under on going development by the open source community. The program source for this product is free.

[Monster Commerce](#) – "Get started for \$99 a month..." They do have an annual plan, and it seems as though they also tout their product as "plug and play."

While the five sites above all seem reasonable, I want to know what their demonstration sites look like. Why? Because I want to know how my site might look with their programming. Additionally, a look at the top clients for any given product might also tell me about the reliability of their product and whether I'll receive immediate and satisfactory response to any problems. Last, but not least, I want to look at the sites from a nonprogrammer's perspective to understand how these sites look to others who might want to use their services. After the reviews below, I'll conclude with my opinions from that perspective to explain which site I might choose to build an e-commerce site...

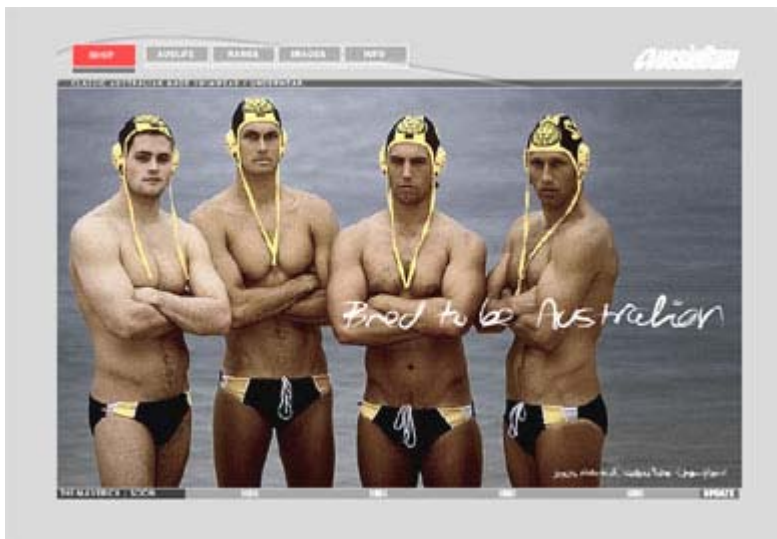
ShopFactory

ShopFactory's site is available in six different languages, and this tells me that they're either spread very thin or that they maintain a professional international approach to their product. When I click on their menu options located at the top of their site, I see that they use resellers; that they offer free service with their product; that they've been in business since 1995; and that they might be using their own products, as two of their top shopping cart products allow clients to "create shops in any language."



[ShopFactory](#)

But, as a designer, I want to know how their program looks when integrated into a site. When I searched for site designs, I discovered that they included a demo that didn't help this non-programmer see exactly what was going on. But one example was a big pull for me as a female...



[AussieBum](#)

ShopFactory pushes Sean Ashby's site, [AussieBum](#), as their prize client and prime example for their shopping cart products. While I spent a few mouth-watering moments enjoying the scenery (as many men might have enjoyed the DMX bikini doll on the front page Summer Sale discounts promo this past week), and while I discovered more about Ashby's phenomenal sales story through [other articles](#), his site didn't convince me that I needed to use ShopFactory as my e-commerce tool. I needed more examples of how this tool might work. So I visited their [online mall](#) filled with sites all powered by ShopFactory.



[Nini's Favorites](#) powered by ShopFactory

While many of the shops powered by ShopFactory seem different, most of the sites also seem powered by a two-column layout. But, they also seem distinctive – some seem professionally designed while others are a little less appealing. This tells me that designers and non-designers alike probably can use this programming with ease.

Agora Cart



[AgoraCart](#)

If I didn't know a few programmers who had used Agora Cart for their clients, I would be turned off by the "members only" portion of the site and some of the technical jargon. What do the members know that I wouldn't know if I didn't join? Of course, I don't know, as I'm not a member. However, I am a huge fan of Open Source, and I have to trust that any product that they push is good, and that support is available. They do include online manuals, and they also maintain a portion of the site for shopping cart demos. Additionally, they have a link that leads prospective downloaders a peek at an [AgoraCart shopping mall](#).

The mall probably proves a huge pull for AgoraCart, as this addition implies community unlike their “members only” implication that might drive users away. A look through some of the “new” listings in the mall under various categories illustrates that many of the site owners either designed the sites themselves or used Web designers who were adept at programming. The designs, however, didn’t wow me – BUT, most of them were fairly simple to use, easy on the eyes, and efficient. If that’s all it takes to create sales, then go for it.

At this point, it might not hurt to mention Trenton Moss’s recent free article on [ten ways to improve the usability of your ecommerce site](#). If you take his ten principles and apply them to the sites available through the AgoraCart mall site, what do you discover? After perusing some of the sites (and without ordering anything), I discovered that many of the sites followed most of Moss’s suggestions. While this might mean that the designers were savvy about these suggestions, I would think that AgoraCart builds these ideas into their programming for a more fool-proof and user-friendly program.

However, I’m still not convinced that I need to use AgoraCart for my e-commerce site...

X-Cart

Ok – right up front this program speaks to me – they state that:

“Some of the most important problems ‘out-of-the-box’ shopping carts owners usually face are described in few simple questions:

1. “Will this ecommerce solution reflect all edges of my business?”
2. “Can I integrate it into my existing website?”
3. “What do I do to make my online shop support special functionality?”

Unlike the AgoraCart site, I found my way easily around the X-Cart site and straight to a list that describes who might want to use this product, and the companies that they’re compatible with. The “who, what, when, where, how, and why” about this company is right up front in easy-to-read lists. But, how easy are they to use, really, and do they provide examples of their e-commerce programming?

[X-Cart](#)

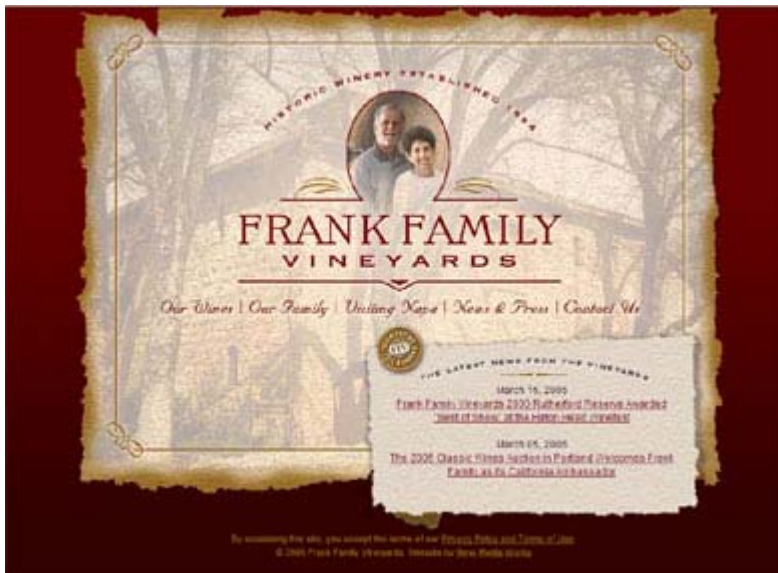
X-Cart [provides demos](#) that could take a person a full day to consider. However, after a few clicks and colour change options, I realize that the operation basically uses a three-column template. They do have a

link for [live shops worldwide](#), and most of these sites also relied on the three-column template example. However, as I began to click through most of them, a few sites began to stand out against the others. First, the basic three-column layout with a header:



[New England Fishing Journal](#) – X-Cart e-commerce site

Now, here's the [Frank Family Vineyards](#), a site with a different and very attractive approach to their wine offerings:



[Frank Family Vineyards](#) uses X-Cart

Inside the wine section:



An example of the [wine cart](#) at the Frank Family Vineyards site...

Other sites on the "live example" list at X-Cart that use a variety of layouts include [Beddington's Bed and Bath](#), [Angela Carol Lingerie](#), and the [Cigar Humidor](#). These site examples offer enough variety for me to know that if I use X-Cart, I can also modify the look to go beyond the typical three-column layout. But, will X-Cart support my need for a "different" look?

X-Cart's links to technical support seem sufficient to answer my questions, and their link to their services illustrated that they don't charge an arm and a leg for such things as custom programming or Flash. Can I trust what they say? Since I don't know anyone who has used X-Cart, I might email a few of their "live examples" to talk with someone who worked with X-Cart. Frankly, I might stop my search right here if I discover that three or more shop owners were very happy with X-Cart. However, I want to check out the last two services on my list to see how they compare.

osCommerce

Here's another Open Source project, one that seems cleaner and less "technical" to a non-programming person. The community involvement seems more open to folks who might want to contribute either time or money to the use of the product, and this openness makes me – for one – feel more comfortable with the community process as well.



[osCommerce](http://www.oscommerce.com)

The [live sites](#) listed at osCommerce, however, are basically the three-column layout that we saw above at the X-Card site. There were a few exceptions, including a baby gift site and a jewelry site:



[Baby Box](#) uses osCommerce



[Kristine's Kreations](#) uses osCommerce

Frankly, I was surprised that the osCommerce sites seemed cleaner and a few notches above the AgoraCart examples in design. Of course, I would envision that it was the designer, not the programming, that would account for the disparity in design detail. But, this difference might also tell me that some competition is going on here – and that osCommerce makes an effort to work with their downloaders (which include some businesses) to create some eye-catching sites. If you compare any one of the 76 sites listed in the osCommerce online examples to those at AgoraCart, you might see the difference, too.

Monster Commerce



[Monster Commerce](#) site

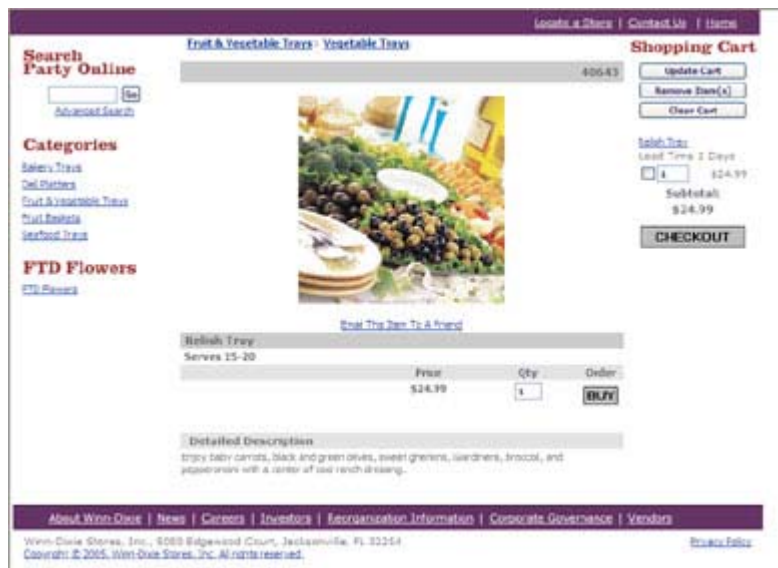
If I relied solely on how an e-commerce site appeared to me on the front end, the Monster Commerce site would turn me off. The gray background with the purple highlights don't speak "business" to me as much as any of the other e-commerce product sites listed above. Additionally, after reviewing the last four sites, I know that Monster Commerce is out of my budget at \$99 per month (or \$999.50 per year). However, I'll look to see why they are so much more expensive.

One click on the "[Clients](#)" link shows me that with clients like Winn-Dixie and Subaru, this e-commerce site caters to larger volume clientele. Let's take a look at a few of these sites:



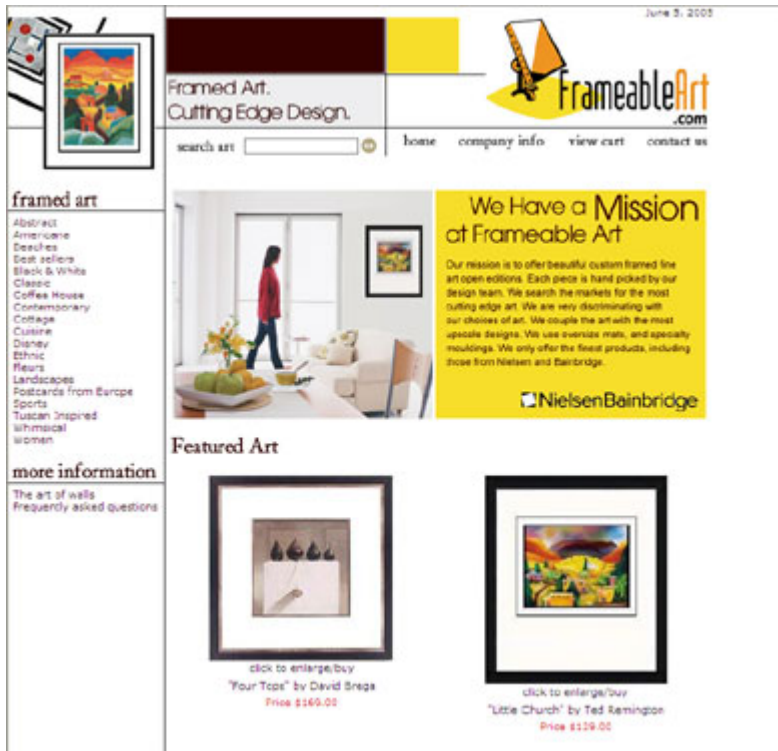
[Winn-Dixie's Party Cart](#) uses Monster Commerce

The site above looks like a three-column layout, and when an order is placed, the three columns pop out:



An order placed at Winn-Dixie.

Another site that uses Monster Commerce is [FrameableArt.com](#):



FrameableArt.com uses Monster Commerce...



...which is also a basic three-column layout when the cart is utilized.

If you continue to go through the sites at Monster Commerce, you'll discover that very few sites vary from the ultimate three-column layout as you see in the sites above. There are several advantages to using Monster Commerce from my perspective, however. One is that I always believe that you get what you pay for, and if that's the case then Monster is my pick for possible service and technical help. Additionally, I could have my

site listed with some other very professional sites. And, lastly, I could ask for customization. However, at this price I feel that I might end up paying much more for customization, among other things, at Monster.

Conclusion

After a brief review of the five e-commerce solutions above, I feel my choice is fairly clear. Remember that I'm not receiving an "associate" sales commission for any recommendation, and that I'm not responsible (nor is DMX) for any opinion that I state here based on my perspectives. First, I didn't use the products above except to click arbitrarily through some of the examples. Additionally, since I haven't used the products, I have no idea how they really work. Finally, I have no clue as to whether the service or technical support is truly reliable.

But, based on my idea of "professional" and "reliable," I would pick X-Cart for my e-commerce solution against the other four competitors. As an alternative, I would pick osCommerce, as the price is right. However, there are other reasons why I would choose one or the other product.

1. While **ShopFactory** appealed to my aesthetics with their one example and other sites seemed to prove that this program would be easy to use, I wasn't convinced that my money would be well spent with this e-commerce tool. Why would ShopFactory be willing to tout just one site as an example, while many other sites seemed just as nice? For one reason, the site that they advertise as a success story is one of those one-in-a-million success stories. Fortunately for ShopFactory, Sean Ashby decided to use their product. Other than this example, the ShopFactory seems no more brilliant than any other e-commerce tool.
2. Despite the fact that many of my programming cohorts have used **AgoraCart** for their clients, I'm not a programmer. Therefore, I fear AgoraCart. To me, they don't come across as user-friendly as does the osCommerce site. So, if I opt to use an Open Source tool, then osCommerce is my choice.
3. **Monster Commerce** is over my budget. And, while the price and product seems like it might be money well spent, for my purposes as a one-person operation Monster is out of my league. And, I don't believe that their services are any better than those offered by ShopFactory or by X-Cart. Additionally, if I needed to find a shopping cart solution for a client, I would make little profit on this tool. There's little room for mark-up.

I liked X-Cart for two reasons: First, they are easy to read and understand. Their copywriter made sure that their site appealed to people who aren't programmers, yet they also send a clear signal to programmers that the product seems easy to apply to a client's site. Additionally, I liked the design styles in their online examples. Whether these designs were done by the clients' designers or by the staff at X-Cart is unknown, but the overall look is professional and *different*.

If I couldn't afford the X-Cart solution (which is very reasonably priced as well), then I would choose the osCommerce site. The folks there seem friendly, upfront, and very down-to-earth. I think that I would feel very comfortable if I had to approach these folks with a problem, and I believe that their programming is also adaptable to a number of different layout possibilities.

Of course, you may have experiences with other e-commerce products or with the ones listed above. Either way, if you have pros or cons about your experiences please let me hear from you. I'm sure that I'm not the only designer out there who would like to know more about what's available for e-commerce site solutions!