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UK is highest in Online Spending League – but are all Web Sites up to the Job?

A recent report commissioned and published by the online shopping aggregator Kelkoo confirmed what many of us already suspected; the UK spends more online than any other country in Europe. In 2009 each UK online shopper managed to spend an average of over £1,000 during the year with the total amounting to £38bn or almost 10% of all retail purchases.

That figure is forecast to reach over £42bn in 2010 and to continue growing at a rate of over 20% per year for the foreseeable future. Hidden within these figures, another interesting statistic is that around 25% of this spending happens in the period leading up to Christmas or approximately 20p in every £1 spent across the retail spectrum.

Whilst these figures are quite mind-boggling, particularly since the online sector only really seriously took off around 5 years ago, what is also happening is that online shoppers are establishing highly predictable behaviour patterns, becoming sophisticated discerning shoppers with high standards expected from their online shopping experience.

In May last year the IT analyst firm, Forrester, published a report that suggested 2 seconds as the maximum response time that online shoppers are prepared to tolerate before losing patience and moving to a competitors online store to complete their transactions.

Retailers have long since understood the psychology of their bricks and mortar customers and have taken steps to meticulously plan the layout, ambience and even smell of their stores to encourage maximum spend per visit. However this is not as easy to achieve in the online environment where customers' olfactory senses are not available to be attacked and manipulated.

That is not to say that the look and feel of the online store is not a major factor in developing customer loyalty but for retailers it is now also as much about the performance of their sites and how they would cope if they were suddenly hit by a huge increase in customers banging on the door like Harrods on the first day of the January sales.

Another good analogy in the physical world is when there is a major failure in the central EPOS system. There are plenty of examples of mass supermarket trolley abandonments when the checkouts fail to operate. It is the same in the online world with shoppers terminating their purchases at the crucial checkout stage when they are left staring at the spinning egg-timer. In either case the results are the same, lost revenues, frustrated customers and damaged reputation that can be difficult to recover from.

Many of the major online retailers have understood this problem and have invested heavily in the development of their Web applications and their network infrastructure to ensure that they can scale to handle thousands of simultaneous transactions, without performance degradation. With permanent in-house development teams they are able to make the necessary investment in sophisticated testing software to enable them to replicate every possible scenario before the site goes live as well as after any major changes or updates during the life of the application.

For the vast majority of the other online stores this is a luxury that most cannot afford or choose to save money by ignoring the issue. This is understandable in the short term due to the costs traditionally associated with enterprise-class performance testing software. But the longer term implications for a site that fails during a peak shopping period can be catastrophic for the business.

What is needed is a low cost solution that can work flexibly with application development schedules and can be accessed as an operational rather than capital investment expense. Since the application is being designed for the Web it makes sense to utilise the Internet as the platform to access testing services, which is why we recently launched blucap.co.uk, an online testing service which gives smaller Web application developers access to the same testing software as the major players as well as experienced consultants, on a pay per use basis.

Given the rapid growth of online shopping, by 2015 it is forecast that 50% of all Christmas purchases will be via the Internet, it is highly likely that not having some form of ecommerce option for any retail operation will be the exception. If that is the case then a whole new mindset is needed in which performance testing is an automatic given for any serious retailer making Testing-as-a-Service a key factor in helping to ensure that the shopper's online experience is in sync with the high street corporate brand.

Paul Caine is Managing Director of performance testing consultants, Trust IV

