

Speed, Search Engine & Conversion Rate Secrets



Website Optimization

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Andrew B. King

Website Optimization

by Andrew B. King

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Conversion Rate Optimization

Conversion rate optimization (CRO) is the art and science of persuading your site visitors to take actions that benefit you, by making a purchase, offering a donation, or committing to some positive future action.

CRO uses a wide variety of techniques, including persuasive copywriting and credibility-based web design, to convert prospects into buyers. By planning, designing, and optimizing your website to persuade, you can ensure that it will act as a more efficient sales tool. You can compare a conversion-optimized website to a successful (but commission- and salary-free) digital salesperson who works for you 24/7, 365 days a year, qualifying leads, building rapport, and even closing sales.

The Benefits of CRO

The importance of CRO becomes clear in light of the poor performance of unoptimized e-commerce websites with average conversion rates of between 2.5% and 3.1%.^{1,2} Although “your mileage may vary,” you can expect that high-quality optimization will increase conversion rates by 50% to 200% or even more. For example, in Chapter 4 we discuss a case in which the increase was more than 600%.

With margins falling and advertising costs rising, a high-performing website has become essential for online success. CRO helps you to meet the following business goals:

- An increase in sales, revenues, and profits
- The generation of more leads for your sales team

¹ Fireclick. January 19, 2008. “Conversion Rate: Global.” Fireclick Index, <http://index.fireclick.com> (accessed January 19, 2008).

² Shop.org. September 18, 2007. “The State of Retailing Online 2007.” National Retail Federation, http://www.nrf.com/modules.php?name=News&op=viewlive&sp_id=365 (accessed February 15, 2008). The shopping cart abandonment rate peaked at 53% in 2003. The conversion rate for e-commerce sites peaked in 2002 at 3.2%. In the 2007 report, e-commerce conversion was 3.1%.

- Boosting “opt-ins” to build your email list
- Reduction of customer acquisition costs
- More page views for advertising
- Engagement of more users
- A permanent improvement to conversion rates

CRO uses proven persuasive techniques to encourage site visitors to act because they have experienced your polished site design, compelling copy, unique selling proposition (USP), and irresistible calls to action. With increased sales, more leads, and higher engagement, what’s not to like about CRO? Yet despite these advantages, we’ve found that CRO is usually the last step taken in optimizing websites.

Most website owners focus on getting more traffic to boost online sales. But paying to advertise an underperforming website is throwing good money after bad. CRO, on the other hand, makes your website work harder for you by producing more sales *now* from your existing website traffic. Its goal is to make every site visit count. However, to maximize your success you need to focus on conversion quality for the life of your site. The savviest optimizers don’t stop after their initial success. They continuously tweak their sites to maximize their return on investment (ROI).

Best Practices for CRO

What follows are the best-practice principles behind CRO. It might seem at first like an extremely broad, almost intangible idea. However, you can achieve conversion by following very specific steps using tools you already have at your disposal. CRO uses what you already know about your customers and their psychology to your advantage by using language, imagery, and a level of engagement that will make your site stand out among those of your competitors.

First, we’ll explore how the principle of *source credibility* can make your site appear more trustworthy. Next, we’ll discuss the psychology of persuasion, including:

- The six primary psychological persuaders
- Maximizing conversions with personas

Then we’ll highlight the top 10 factors that you can use to maximize your site’s conversion rate, including:

- Credibility-based design
- Easy navigation
- Logo credibility
- Memorable slogans
- Benefit-oriented headlines
- Best content placement

- Calls to action
- Benefit-oriented content
- Using “hero shots”
- Interactivity and engagement

You’ll learn how to stage your CRO campaign through the discovery, planning, and optimization phases. Finally, we’ll show these techniques in action by analyzing two examples of best conversion practices.

Source Credibility: Designing Gut Reactions

Source credibility theory helps to explain the visceral reaction that users have to your site. People tend to believe messages from sources that appear to be credible. So, if users perceive your website to be credible and authoritative, your messages will be more persuasive. A credibility-based visual design and logo help to convey your company’s credibility traits, such as “expert” and “trustworthy.”

But what makes a site credible? Research shows that credible sites have a number of specific characteristics. For example, they have a professional look and feel that instills confidence in their visitors.³ They have well-structured content with intuitive navigation that enables visitors to find what they are looking for quickly and easily. They use layouts optimized for how visitors view and absorb information on the Web. These websites start with a USP that codifies and clarifies exactly what makes them a better choice than the competition.

Believable websites that download quickly and are responsive to queries have higher conversion rates.⁴ They communicate with visitors in customer-focused language. They use *trigger words* designed to click with users. They provide engaging benefit-oriented content that focuses on visitor needs and goals. Credible sites are successful because they solve problems and answer questions with content tailored to their target market and even adapted to the different personalities or *personas* of their target customers. In short, they are persuasive.

The Psychology of Persuasion

Nobody likes to be coerced or manipulated. To be persuaded, however, is OK. The persuasive techniques that you’ll learn in this section will make a favorable response to your requests more likely. In fact, many of the conversion best practices found on the

³ Robins, D., and J. Holmes. 2008. “Aesthetics and credibility in web site design.” *Information Processing and Management* 44 (1): 386–399. Preconscious judgments of aesthetics influence perceived credibility of websites. *Voilà!* Instant credibility.

⁴ Akamai. 2007. “Boosting Online Commerce Profitability with Akamai.” <http://www.akamai.com> (accessed February 15, 2008). Akamai estimated a 9% to 15% improvement in conversion rate after a website is “Akamaized.”

Web are based on these psychological principles. For example, testimonials and awards use *social proof* to invoke the wisdom of the crowd, free white papers exchanged for contact information use *reciprocity*, and uniformed people showing wares and services are presumed to be *authoritative*. Airlines and hotels use *scarcity* when they say that only *x* number of tickets or rooms are left at a given price. All of these techniques are used on the Web to increase desire and to influence people to buy now.

The six persuaders

Persuasive techniques *influence* people to comply with requests. Although there are thousands of techniques that you can use to get people to convert, most of them fall into six basic categories, according to Robert Cialdini's *Influence: Science and Practice* (Allyn & Bacon). These six persuaders are *reciprocation*, *consistency*, *social proof*, *liking*, *authority*, and *scarcity*. Skilled salespeople use these techniques in conjunction with social norms to induce a sense of urgency in customers, and to avoid a loss of face or loss of opportunity.

Reciprocation: Repaying an obligation. Humans feel obligated to repay a gift from others. Reciprocation is a social norm that obligates the recipient to repay a favor in the future. This ensures continuing relationships which sociologists say is beneficial to society.

On the Web, you can use reciprocity and rewards to increase the likelihood that customers will provide you with their contact information. You can use free online tools and multimedia downloads to induce the recipient to give her contact information. You can also request contact information from your customers before the fact, in exchange for content. Site owners often trade a free white paper for an email address, for example. Reciprocation in the form of asking for contact information after the fact has been shown to be more effective in getting detailed contact information than reward (asking for contact information before the fact).⁵

Consistency and commitment: Little yeses. One key to getting people to convert is our human need for consistency. Once we commit to something, we want our future actions to appear consistent with that decision. That small initial commitment makes us more likely to agree to larger requests that are similar.

On the Web and with your sales force, be sure to get prospects to commit with “little yeses” to move the buying process along toward the big “Yes!” For example, asking a prospect whether she agrees that saving money, time, or effort is a good idea will yield an easy yes. If you follow up with a question about her problem and then offer the same type of savings through your solution, you are more likely to get a positive response.

⁵ Gamberini, L. et al. 2007. “Embedded Persuasive Strategies to Obtain Visitors’ Data: Comparing Reward and Reciprocity in an Amateur, Knowledge-Based Website,” in *Persuasive 2007* (Stanford University, CA: April 26–27), 194.

Social proof: A bestseller! Humans often decide what is correct by observing what other people think is correct. This “social evidence” can stimulate compliance with a request. Telling a person that many other people have made the same choice encourages your prospect to comply. The principle of social proof works best under conditions of uncertainty and similarity.

You can use social proof to your advantage to raise perceived credibility on the Web. Impressive client lists, third-party seals of authority, and Amazon’s “Customers Who Bought This Item Also Bought...” are forms of social proof. Glowing testimonials can have the same effect. In fact, customer endorsements from peers have a significant positive effect on trust, as well as on attitudes and willingness to buy.⁶ Remember to back up your claims so that there is no backlash.

Another behavior influenced by social proof is the fear factor about buying online. After hearing stories of hackers and identity theft in the news media, many buyers who are not tech-savvy are apprehensive about buying online. As a result, online retailers must build confidence and trust with visitors by decreasing perceived risk and uncertainty.

The more confident we are in our decisions, the more likely we are to buy. Trust, information quality, familiarity, and reputation have strong effects that support our intention to buy. Increase perceived credibility by deploying third-party *e-seals* of approval such as those from the Better Business Bureau, eTrust, and HACKER SAFE. You may get a higher conversion rate with a trust graphic,⁷ but we encourage you to experiment and test different e-seals. Naturally, all third-party seals must be used strictly in accordance with the rules and regulations of the awarding organizations.

Liking: Friends selling bonds. Most people tend to say yes to people they know or like. We are more likely to convert when a product or service is associated with physically attractive people, positive circumstances or attributes, and/or people who are similar to us. Additionally, a recommendation from a friend or someone we know has much more weight than a cold call from a stranger.

The wording that you use on your website can significantly affect your conversion rates. Sophisticated marketers create personas, or personality archetypes, that help to customize different paths for different types of customers. Each path has copy that is tailored for that persona’s level of education, different personality characteristics, and needs. By populating your paths with friendly, tailored, benefit-oriented copy, you can kick-start the liking process. You’ll learn more about personas later in this chapter.

⁶ Lim, K. et al. 2006. “Do I Trust You Online, and If So, Will I Buy? An Empirical Study of Two Trust-Building Strategies.” *Journal of Management Information Systems* 23 (2): 233–266. Although rewards received more replies, reciprocation got more detailed responses.

⁷ McAfee. 2008. “HACKER SAFE certified sites prevent over 99.9% of hacker crime.” <http://www.scanalert.com/site/en/certification/marketing/> (accessed February 18, 2008). McAfee claims an average increase in conversion rate of 14% among 150 million unique visitors who see the HACKER SAFE mark. Your mileage may vary.

Authority: Dutiful deference. Systemic societal pressures have instilled deference to authority in most humans. We tend to obey people who appear authoritative, especially those with impressive titles and the trappings of what people in the culture consider signs of success.

To enhance the authority effect on credibility, you can emphasize the titles and education of your staff on your website. Be sure to mention any books, studies, and articles that your staff has published. Including images of people in suits or uniforms where appropriate will add gravitas to the authority of your website.

Scarcity: Exclusive limited numeric offer! When an opportunity appears to be less available, people assign it a higher value. We are more likely to desire a scarce opportunity when it has recently become scarce or when we have to compete for it. We also hate to lose established freedoms. This is called *psychological reactance*.

You can use perceived scarcity to sell more products and services on the Web. By limiting the number of products or services that you sell, you can evoke the scarcity principle. For example, when travelers go to Orbitz.com to buy airline tickets, they are often told that there are only X available seats left at that price (see Figure 5-1).



Figure 5-1. Orbitz.com using scarcity to sell airline tickets

Similarly, Amazon.com shows the number of books left before a new order must be placed, citing attendant delays if you don't act now. Amazon also calculates the time you have left to make your purchase to receive it by a certain date.

Building trust to close the sale

Successful sites build trust and confidence in their visitors and make clear to the visitor how he can take action that will lead to a sale. At each decision point, successful sites reassure visitors with information designed to keep buying momentum high and uncertainty low.

Ease of use is most important in building trust in the information gathering stage. *Structural assurance* becomes more important in the evaluation and purchasing stages.

Maximizing Conversion with Personas

The most successful websites are the ones built with input from marketers who understand *who* their customers are and *what* unique personality traits their customers have. They understand *which* common needs and goals their customers possess and the psychology of *why* they buy. Personas, the composite personality archetypes of your customers, help you target different personality types to maximize conversion rates. You can discover the personas of your customers by conducting user interviews, by observing focus groups, and by analyzing search behavior.

Personality types influence the ways in which people make decisions and the questions they ask. Psychologists have identified four main personality types: Jung called them Intuitor, Sensor, Thinker, and Feeler. The Eisenberg brothers, coauthors of *Call to Action: Secret Formulas to Improve Online Results* (Thomas Nelson), call them Competitive, Spontaneous, Methodical, and Humanistic.

Each of your visitors perceives value in a different way. Here is a summary of each dominant personality type:^a

- **Competitive:** Their questions focus on the *what*. They want control and they value competence. They can put off immediate gratification for future gain. They want rational options and challenges.
- **Spontaneous:** Their questions focus on *why* and sometimes *when*. They are impulsive and fast-paced. They want to address their own immediate needs.
- **Methodical:** Their questions focus on *how*. They are detail-oriented and organized. They want facts and hard data to make decisions.
- **Humanistic:** Their questions focus on *who*. They tend to be altruistic and can sublimate their own needs for others. They want testimonials, the big picture, and incentives.

Websites that use personas (e.g., “business” or “consumer” at IBM.com) direct consumers to different paths based on their particular interests or goals. To maximize conversion rates, you can tailor your copy to the personality type of the person you are targeting. You can adapt your website paths and sales techniques to a person’s particular level of education and desires by using “trigger words” and content styles that feel familiar to your target audience.

^a Eisenberg, B. et al. 2006. *Persuasive Online Copywriting—How to Take Your Words to the Bank*. New York: Future Now, 60–64. <http://www.futurenowinc.com> (accessed February 15, 2008). This is an updated PDF of the original 2002 book from Wizard Academy Press.

Assurance includes credibility boosters such as a privacy policy link under an email form, or a VeriSign or HACKER SAFE certification where a customer will enter a credit card number.⁸

⁸ Chau, P. et al. 2007. “Examining customers’ trust in online vendors and their dropout decisions: An empirical study.” *Electronic Commerce Research and Applications* 6 (2): 171–182.

Top 10 Factors to Maximize Conversion Rates

There are more than a thousand ways to optimize your website to maximize conversion rates.⁹ What follows are the 10 most important factors that you can use to boost conversions with your website.

Factor #1: Use a Credibility-Based Professional Design

Your site has just a moment to be trusted, or busted.¹⁰ A professionally designed site makes the type of first impression (fast, mistake-free, attractive, and credible) that prevents scaring away more business than you get. Amazingly, trust is built on the “thin slice” of a first impression, as Malcolm Gladwell, author of the bestseller *Blink* (Little, Brown and Company), has found. What goes into credibility-based design? Your site needs to be:

Fast

Your site will be judged in the blink of an eye, so it must become visible very quickly. Site owners often make the mistake of using heavy graphical elements that slow their sites down. Many visitors leave before these elements have even loaded. Page display times greater than four seconds put you at a credibility disadvantage.

Mistake-free

This goes beyond spellchecking. Your site must be free of style errors, coding errors, design errors, factual errors, grammatical errors, redundancies, and incomplete content. Such errors significantly reduce perceived quality, harm credibility, and derail intent to purchase.¹¹ In fact, the *perception* of flaws in a site affects perceived quality by more than twice as much as do actual flaws. Thus, small errors can become magnified in your visitors’ eyes. This is one of the two most important factors cited as making the best first impression. The other factor is attractiveness.

Attractive

Studies have found that attractiveness is the single most important factor in increasing credibility. Testing the same content with high and low aesthetic treatments, one study found that a higher aesthetic treatment increased perceived credibility.¹² When a company has invested in professional website and logo design, consumers infer that the firm can be trusted.¹³

⁹ Eisenberg, B. February 21, 2003. “How to Decrease Sales by 90 Percent.” ClickZ, <http://www.clickz.com/showPage.html?page=1588161> (accessed June 5, 2008.) Found over 1,100 factors that affect conversion rates.

¹⁰Lindgaard, G. et al. 2006. “Attention web designers: You have 50 milliseconds to make a good first impression!” *Behavior and Information Technology* 25 (2):115–126. See also the introduction to Part II.

¹¹Everard, A., and D. Galletta. Winter 2005–2006. “How Presentation Flaws Affect Perceived Site Quality, Trust, and Intention to Purchase from an Online Store.” *Journal of Management Information Systems* 22 (3): 55–95.

¹²Robins and Holmes. “Aesthetics and credibility in web site design,” 397.

¹³Schlosser, A. et al. 2006. “Converting Web Site Visitors into Buyers: How Web Site Investment Increases Consumer Trusting Beliefs and Online Purchase Intentions.” *Journal of Marketing* 70 (2): 133–148. Site investment equals trust in a firm’s abilities.

Sites that are credible convert visitors into buyers. This is the bottom line of commercial website design. Mistake-free, attractive pages and logos are the keys to increasing credibility. And you've seen that speed is important if you are going to deliver that necessary experience to your visitors. All of this is available with professional website design, because true professional website design is credibility-based design.

Factor #2: Make Website Navigation Easy

Users frequently criticize difficult navigation in website usability surveys. If visitors can't find what they're looking for, they will bail out of your website and look elsewhere. Your site design should allow your visitors to get where they want to go quickly and easily with a minimum number of clicks. Avoid using your internal company jargon, which visitors may not understand. Feature a consistent integrated navigation design using popular conventions. Write compelling, benefit-oriented link text to encourage visitors to click to your products or services. Longer link text has been shown to convert better than shorter link text. We'll explore optimum link length later in this chapter.

To help orient visitors, use site maps and a logical hierarchy that is not too deep. Users prefer tabbed navigation to other forms of web navigation.¹⁴ They also prefer that vertical navigation, if used, appear on the left because that is where most users look first.

Factor #3: Optimize the Credibility of Your Logo

Your logo is often the first impression that your visitors have of your company. Does your logo present your company as expert and trustworthy? How do you know? It helps to have an extensive background and training in commercial art and psychology. But barring that, you may find the following introduction helpful.

Dr. William Haig, coauthor of *The Power of Logos* (John Wiley and Sons), provides a framework for designers to create credibility-based logo designs.¹⁵ These "source credibility" logos have been shown to increase conversion rates by up to a factor of four.

A logo which contained the credibility traits of a website company induced 2x to 4x more clickthroughs than logos which did not have the same credibility traits and were thus considered non-credible.¹⁶

¹⁴Burrell, A., and A. Sodan. "Web Interface Navigation Design: Which Style of Navigation-Link Menus Do Users Prefer?" in *ICDEW 2006* (Atlanta: April 3–7, 2006), 10 pages.

¹⁵Haig, W., and L. Harper. 1997. *The Power of Logos: How to Create Effective Company Logos*. New York: John Wiley. Haig coined the term "credibility-based logo design" in his master's thesis at the University of Hawaii, "Credibility Compared to Likeability: A Study of Company Logos," in 1979. His *Logos* book expanding on his thesis followed.

¹⁶Haig, W.L. 2006. "How and Why Credibility-Based Company Logos are Effective in Marketing Communication in Persuading Customers to Take Action: A Multiple Case Study Toward a Better Understanding of Creativity in Branding." Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia.

The psychology behind credibility-based logos is to encourage the acceptance of messages that motivate consumers to take action. Logos lend credibility to the company's main message. So, if the source of a message is perceived to be credible and trustworthy (partly as a result of your logo design), the messages your company transmits will be more influential. In persuasive communication theory this is called *source credibility*.

The key to Haig's theory is to translate nonverbal communication into design forms that convey the specific credibility traits of the company in a logo. Haig found that a successful logo must:

- *Be credibility-based*. It must incorporate attributes—such as competent, knowledgeable, trustworthy, cutting-edge, conservative, dynamic, exciting, traditional, forward-thinking, and innovation—that are specific to the company.
- *Symbolize* the company's core competency.
- *Be designed to communicate* that the company is trustworthy.
- *Be planned* in content and in design form.
- *Use a symbol* over, or next to, or to the left of the company name.
- *Be prominent in application* and be frequently and consistently used.
- Have a graphical symbol and name that *work together*.

Your logo is a graphical icon that symbolizes the credibility of your business. Effective logos are designed for immediate recognition. As described in Alina Wheeler's *Designing Brand Identity: A Complete Guide to Creating, Building, and Maintaining Strong Brands* (John Wiley and Sons), they inspire trust, admiration, and loyalty, and imply superiority. Make sure your logo is professionally designed to symbolize your company's unique credibility traits.

Haig said this about credibility and conversion:

Only 1–5 visitors out of 100 follow the links on a website to the “purchase” page. My work shows that over 90 percent do not even get to the “follow the link” stage. Only about 8 to 10 percent do at “first glance” within the first few seconds. My work shows that a credibility-based logo design can increase the “first glance rate” by up to 4 times. This means that a “credibility-based logo” and a “credibility-based home page” with consistent credibility traits expressed through design will more than double the visitors to the “purchase” page. That is big bucks baby!

To view some examples of credibility-based logo designs, see Haig's website at <http://www.powerlogos.com>.

Factor #4: Write a Memorable Slogan

A tagline or a brief branding slogan should be placed near your logo. *Slogan* is derived from the Gaelic word *sluagh-ghairm* which means battle cry. Your slogan should be a memorable phrase, a battle cry that sums up your company's benefits and image.¹⁷ Your tagline should be an abbreviated version of your USP that links the slogan to your brand.

Some memorable taglines include:

- “A diamond is forever.” (DeBeers, 1948)
- “When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight.” (FedEx, 1982)
- “Got milk?” (California Milk Processing Board, 1993)

Your slogan, your logo, and your brand name are three key elements that identify your brand. Together they create *brand equity*, which differentiates how consumers respond to your marketing efforts. A higher differential increases what consumers know about your brand, allowing you to charge a premium for your offerings.

Brand names are rarely changed, whereas logos and taglines often change over time as your company evolves. Ideally, taglines should be designed for future expansion. Good slogans:

- Communicate the *biggest benefit* that your product provides
- Are simple yet *memorable*
- Use *active voice*, with the adverb near the verb for more impact
- *Differentiate* your brand
- *Link* your slogan to your brand name
- Are designed for *future expansion*
- *Embrace ambiguity* (puns and other wordplay, for example, are inexact but memorable)
- *Prime* your desired attributes
- Jump-start recall with *jingles*

Larger companies often hire brand management firms to create their taglines, their USPs, and their logos, spending millions in the process. You don't need to spend millions to come up with an effective tagline; you've got this book. Later in this chapter we'll show you how to create a compelling USP.

¹⁷Kohli, C., L. Leuthesser, and R. Suri. 2007. “Got slogan? Guidelines for creating effective slogans.” *Business Horizons* 50 (5): 415–422.

Factor #5: Use Benefit-Oriented Headlines

Your initial headline contains the first words that your visitors will read on your site. So, to improve conversion rates, grab their attention. Use headlines that clearly state the most important benefits that your product or service offers. For example, emphasize saving money, time, and energy. Think search engine optimization (SEO) when writing your headlines by including the keywords that you want to target. Finally, design your headlines for scanning by placing your most important keywords up front.¹⁸ Note how this *feature-laden* headline:

Use half the watts with low-voltage fluorescent light bulbs!

can become the following *benefit-oriented* headline:

Energy-efficient fluorescent light bulbs save you money!

The use of passive voice permits the placement of keywords early in headlines. Used in body copy, however, passive voice creates impersonal and potentially confusing language. Headlines that ask visitors to *act* can boost click-through rates (CTRs). Combining these headlines with free offers increases conversion rates even more.

Optimum link length

Headlines are often used as link text. Longer link text, on the order of 7 to 12 words, has been shown to have higher success rates than shorter link text (see Figure 5-2).¹⁹

Success here is defined as the likelihood of a link bringing the user closer to where she wants to go. Longer link text is more likely to contain the right trigger words that the user seeks. The more likely that a trigger word is present, the higher the scent of a link.

Factor #6: Give Important Content the Best Placement

The position of components on your web pages can make a significant difference in your website conversions and site flow-through. Users look first at the top-left corner of your web page and scan to the right and then to the left in an F-shaped pattern.²⁰ They end up in the center of your page where the most important content should reside.²¹ They focus less on the right side of web pages, or to areas that look like ads. Because most people focus first on the left side of the screen, navigation works well on the left side for left-to-right readers. The right side of the screen works well for testimonials, calls to action, and sign-up forms. As with all best practices, be sure to experiment to maximize conversion rates for your situation (see Chapter 10).

¹⁸Nielsen, J. September 6, 1998. "Microcontent: How to Write Headlines, Page Titles, and Subject Lines." Alertbox, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/980906.html> (accessed February 18, 2008).

¹⁹Spool, J. et al. 2004. "Designing for the Scent of Information." User Interface Engineering, <http://www.uie.com> (accessed March 30, 2008). Figure 5-2 reproduced by permission.

²⁰Nielsen, J. April 17, 2006. "F-Shaped Pattern For Reading Web Content." Alertbox, http://www.useit.com/alertbox/reading_pattern.html (accessed February 17, 2008).

²¹MarketingSherpa. 2004. *Landing Page Handbook* 1. Warren, RI: MarketingSherpa, 91.

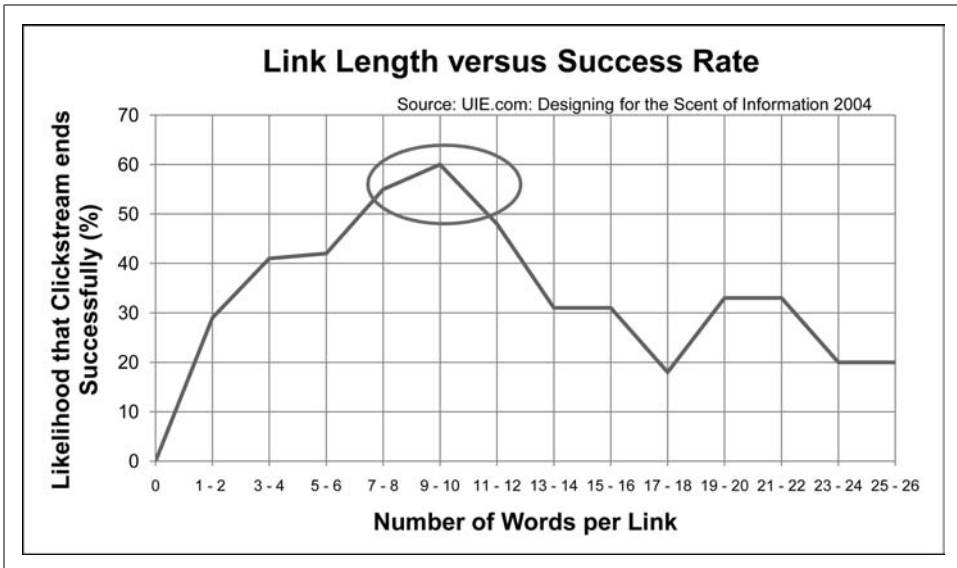


Figure 5-2. Link length versus success rate

To boost click-through and conversion rates, place your most important links, forms, and calls to action in the first screen (i.e., above the fold). In an eye-tracking study of web pages, 76.5% of the users clicked on links above the fold, whereas the rest clicked on links below the fold.²²

To maximize conversion rates on landing pages, repeat the search terms that brought users to your page in the first screen. Think of your visitors as grazing *informativores* with very short attention spans.²³ They look for morsels of useful information to devour. Break up your copy with compelling subheadlines to make your content easy to digest.

Factor #7: Include Appealing Offers and Calls to Action

Your offer is a *call to action*. You are asking your visitors to act: to purchase, sign up, or opt in. Well-drafted calls to action motivate users to move further into the sales process.²⁴ For example, this:

SUBMIT NOW

becomes this:

Click here to download your free white paper

²²Weinreich, H. et al. 2006. "Off the Beaten Tracks: Exploring Three Aspects of Web Navigation." In *WWW 2006* (Edinburgh, Scotland: May 23–26, 2006), 133–142.

²³Pirolli, P. 2007. *Information Foraging Theory: Adaptive Interaction with Information*. New York: Oxford University Press. A theoretical but fundamentally important book for web designers.

²⁴Eisenberg, B. et al. 2006. *Call to Action: Secret Formulas to Improve Online Results* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson), 144.

Factor #8: Deploy Persuasive, Benefit-Oriented Content

Write persuasive, compelling copy with benefits that appeal to the needs of your customers. Whether you are showing the benefits of your service or offering product descriptions on your e-commerce website, your content must convey benefits that capture your visitors' attention.

For example, avoid feature-oriented copy such as this:

5.7 liter hemi 4 valve engine. The Tundra engine incorporates a number of innovative, high-tech features that boost horsepower and fuel efficiency. It provides high compression ratios, hemispherical cylinder heads, and four valves per cylinder to improve combustion.

Instead, use personas to create targeted, benefit-oriented copy (see the “Maximizing Conversion with Personas” sidebar, earlier in this chapter). The following copy assumes that a prospect is looking for power and status in a vehicle:

5.7 Liter Hemi V8 provides maximum horsepower for towing heavy loads. The tough Tundra truck boasts a high-tech 5.7 liter V8 engine with plenty of power to tow the heaviest of payloads. You'll turn heads towing your boat to the beach, while saving money with our innovative fuel-efficient design.

Do I want more power? Yes! Do I want to turn heads? Yes! Sign me up for one of those bad boys.

Benefit Bullets and Value Hierarchies

The *benefit bullet* format presents the benefits of your product in the order of its *value hierarchy* to your target market. In other words, list the strongest benefits of your product first, and its weakest benefit last. For example, with the new Tundra truck you can:

- Tow heavy loads (powerful 5.7 liter V8 engine)
- Arrive in style (new streamlined design)
- Save money (fuel-efficient engine with four valves per cylinder)

Avoid features. Think benefits. Features appeal to the intellect, benefits appeal to emotions. Without an emotional buy-in, customers won't click.

Factor #9: Use Illustrative Product and Service Images—The “Hero Shot”

The images that you display on your web pages can significantly improve your conversion rates. If you sell products, including images of those products is an obvious choice.

If you sell a service, you can add an image that represents the benefit and value of your service (see Figure 5-3).

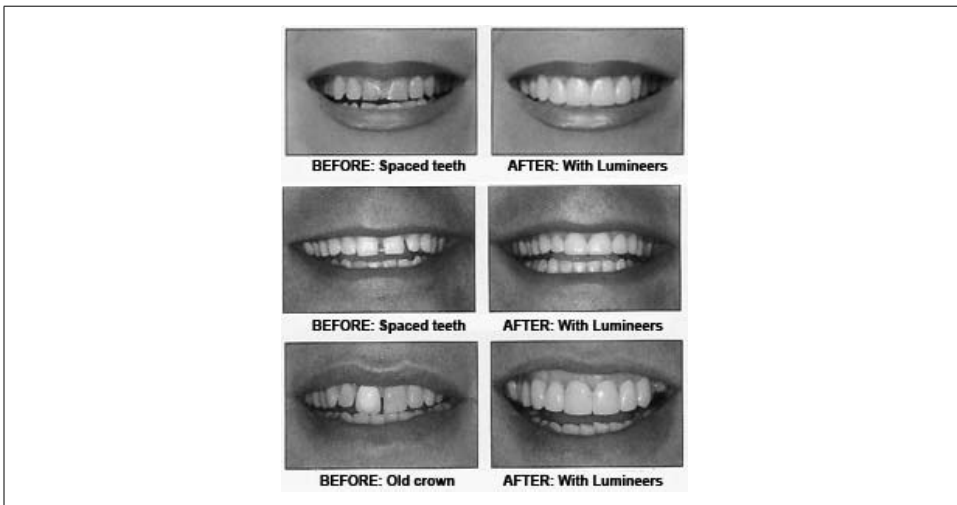


Figure 5-3. Before and after shots for a cosmetic dentistry site

Use the source credibility effect by showing attractive people in uniforms who are administering your offerings and services or answering the phone. Place a picture of your staff on your “About Us” page to improve your credibility and trust by showing that your staff is real.

Follow these best practices for product images:

- Use *one high-quality image* that represents your product or service. If you sell a product, use a photo of the product.
- *Don't use clip art* or stock photos that are not relevant to the product.
- Position your descriptive text to the *right* of your product images. It is uncomfortable for your visitors to read text that is to the left of the product image. Note that most catalogs have the product on the left and the descriptive text on the right.²⁵
- For multiple images displayed on one page, *place your most important products in the center or on the left* of the page. Studies have shown that people look at the thumbnails on the right last.²⁶
- *Make your product images clickable*. People enjoy clicking on images to view larger, more detailed versions of your “hero shot” (i.e., a picture of your product or service). You can also consider using a pop-up window that offers a larger, more detailed image with additional text describing the product.

²⁵MarketingSherpa. 2005. *Landing Page Handbook 1*. Warren, RI: MarketingSherpa, 51.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 49.

- Add a *descriptive caption* under the image. Studies show that your headline and caption are the two content items on your web pages that are read the most.²⁷ Captions and part numbers also make good SEO copy (see Figure 5-4).



Figure 5-4. Google lava lamp

Factor #10: Use Interactive Elements to Engage Users

Immediately interest and engage your site visitors with interactive website components. These elements invite your visitors to focus their attention on your message. They include audio, video, and web-based devices such as Flash movies and interactive customer support tools such as LivePerson.

Interactivity in various forms, such as forums, a feedback form, and search tools, have been shown to boost website usability²⁸ and user satisfaction.²⁹ You can use these technologies to engage your website visitors in real time and get them to take actions that lead to more conversions.

For example, adding a *video or Flash movie* to your website that illustrates the benefits of your product or service will improve conversions (see Figure 5-5).

²⁷Ibid., 51.

²⁸Teo, H.H. et al. 2003. "An empirical study of the effects of interactivity on web user attitude." *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies* 58 (3): 281–305.

²⁹Lowry, P. et al. 2006. "A Theoretical Model and Empirical Results Linking Website Interactivity and Usability Satisfaction." In *HICSS 2006* (January 4–7, 2006), 9 pages.



Figure 5-5. Toyota Highlander Hybrid Flash movie

If you add the LivePerson customer support tool to your website and train your customer support staff to use it effectively, you can increase your conversions by up to 500% and reduce the length of your sales cycle by 48%, according to LivePerson (see Figure 5-6).³⁰



Figure 5-6. LivePerson symbol

Adding a *video spokesperson* increased the conversion rate of DiscoveryStore.com by 78% (see Figure 5-7 for an example).³¹

Remember, it's not simply the presence of an interactive feature that is important, but rather how well you use it. The speed and content quality of the chat message are higher predictors of interactivity than the mere presence of a chat function.³²

Staging Your CRO Campaign

The next discussion is divided into three sections: *discovery*, *planning*, and *optimization*. While these include important techniques for CRO, they're not the only techniques.

³⁰LivePerson. 2007. "Hoover's increases conversion rates and average order values with LivePerson's proactive chat." LivePerson, <http://www.liveperson.com/customers/hooovers/results.asp> (accessed February 17, 2008).

³¹MarketingSherpa. July 19, 2005. "Video Spokesmodel Lifts Ecommerce Conversions 78%: A/B Test Results." MarketingSherpa, <https://www.marketingsherpa.com/barrier.html?id=24086> (accessed February 17, 2008).

³²Song, J., and G. Zinkhan. 2008. "Exploring the Determinants of Perceived Web Site Interactivity." *Journal of Marketing* 72 (2).



Figure 5-7. Example from MyWeddingFavors.com of a video spokesperson

You will want to implement these along with the other methods described elsewhere in this book, including website testing, search-friendly site development, and high-performance web design.

Discovery

As you learned earlier in this chapter, in “The Benefits of CRO,” most websites convert at only a fraction of their true potential: 3.1%, according to a Shop.org study (<http://www.shop.org/soro>). The reason for this startling statistic is that most websites have not been planned with the conversion needs of target visitors in mind.

This process involves *discovering* who your target visitors are so that you can understand their specific needs, goals, psychology, and hot buttons. By discovering their unique needs, you can write content to address those needs and answer their questions so that they convert.

Discovering personas

Using discovery questions enables you to identify who your prospective customers are. The following questions will help you discover how to use your website to persuade customers to buy from you or to become a lead for your sales team.

Demographics. What kinds of people buy from your website? Are they male or female? What is their age? What is their occupation? What is their income and education, and how do these factors play an important role in their buying decision?

Psychographics. Different personality types respond differently to who, what, where, why, and when. Knowing this information allows you to build personas to tailor content to each personality type.

Geographic region. Where is your target market located? Do you sell globally, nationally, or just to the locals in your hometown? If you cater to a local market, can you provide your customers with a map and directions to your office or retail store?

Customer pain points and goals. What is the main problem that your typical prospect wants to fix? What is the *most important factor* to the prospect who is considering buying your offerings?

Value proposition. Why would a prospect favor your business over all other competitors? What makes your company unique? For example, if you are a pizza company and you offer “Delivery in 30 minutes or it’s free,” tell the world! This information allows you to position your business as the best choice with a strong value proposition and guarantee.

Benefit hierarchy. What benefits are important to your target prospect? Construct a list of these benefits in order, beginning with the most important. Knowing this information allows you to write content that speaks to the heart of your website visitors, and helps to move them past their emotional tipping point.

Key frustrations and objections. What are the biggest frustrations and objections that your prospects have when conducting business with companies in your industry? Do your customers hate to pay shipping and handling fees? Do they feel that your products cost too much? Do they have specific questions that you can answer on your website? This information allows you to create content that reduces your prospects’ reluctance to buy. To address their objections, provide answers to their most pressing questions and rebuttals to their objections to buying. You can also reduce key frustrations and objections by offering free shipping, low prices, satisfaction guarantees, toll-free phone numbers, FAQs, or easy financing. Plus, you can provide trust-builders such as privacy policies and security seals.

Buying criteria. What specific factors do your prospects look for when making decisions to buy your products or services? Knowing this information allows you to write content that positions you as the expert in the industry who helps customers make good decisions.

Risk reversal. How can you lower or even eliminate the risk in buying your product or service? How can you encourage your clients to trust you? Risk-reversal techniques create offers that many customers can’t refuse. Examples include 100% satisfaction guarantees, free return shipping, free trials, and unconditional money-back guarantees.

Keyword phrases. What keyword phrases does your target market use in search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, and MSN Search to find your product or service? Incorporate these search terms into your web pages to mirror their queries and optimize your site for search engines.

The Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

The competition on the Web is fierce. You need to differentiate yourself from your competitors and position your company as the best choice in the market. What makes your company unique?

Having a compelling USP will dramatically improve the positioning and marketability of your company and its products. It accomplishes three things for you:

- It clearly sets you apart from your competition, positioning you as the best choice for your customers' *unique* needs.
- It persuades others to *exchange money* for your product or service.
- It is *a proposal* or offer that you make for acceptance.

Your USP is the force that drives your business to succeed. You also can use it as a branding tool and a selling tool. In addition, your widely deployed USP allows you to build a lasting reputation while you're making sales. The ultimate goal of your USP and marketing is to have people say, "Oh yes, I've heard of you. You're the company that...", and continue by requesting more information or by purchasing your product.

Your USP communicates the very essence of what you are offering. It needs to be so compelling and so benefit-oriented that it can be used as a headline all by itself to sell your product or service. Because you want to optimize your website and all of your marketing materials, create your USP before you create content and advertisements.

The following seven-step process shows you how to construct a USP for your business.

Step 1: Use your biggest benefits. Clearly describe the three biggest benefits of owning your product or service. You have to explain to your prospects exactly how your product will benefit them. What are the three biggest benefits that you offer? For example:

- Faster delivery
- Lower cost
- Higher quality

Step 2: Be unique. Essentially, your USP separates you from the competition, sets up buying criteria that illustrates your company as the most logical choice, and makes your product or service the "must have" item.

You can state your USP in your product description, in your offer, or in your guarantee, but it should always create desire and urgency:

Product: "The Fluke VR1710 Voltage Quality Recorder Is an Easy-to-Use Instrument That Will Help You Instantly Detect Power Quality Problems."

Offer: "Order the New Fluke VR1710 Voltage Quality Recorder to Quickly Detect Power Quality Problems."

Guarantee: "The New Fluke VR1710 Voltage Quality Recorder Will Help You Quickly Detect Power Quality Problems, Guaranteed."

Winning USP Examples



Federal Express (FedEx) nearly equals the U.S. Post Office in the overnight package shipping market with the following USP:

“Federal Express: When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight.”

This USP allowed FedEx to quickly gain market share in the express delivery market, increasing its sales and profits.

In today’s competitive market, your business cannot thrive if you are using copycat marketing. Your small business absolutely, positively has to have a USP that cuts through the clutter. Your USP must position you not as the best choice, but as the *only* choice.

Building your USP is worth the effort because of the added advantage you’ll have in the market. Using a powerful USP will make your job of marketing and selling much easier.

The following are two powerful USPs that alleviate the “pain” experienced by consumers in their industries.

Example #1—The food industry:

- Pain: The kids are hungry, but Mom and Dad are too tired to cook!
- USP: “You get fresh, hot pizza delivered to your door in 30 minutes or less—or it’s free.” (Domino’s Pizza original USP)

Example #2—The cold medicine industry:

- Pain: You are sick, feel terrible, and can’t sleep.
- USP: “The nighttime, sniffing, sneezing, coughing, aching, fever, best-sleep-you-ever-got-with-a-cold medicine.” (NyQuil)

Step 3: Solve an industry “pain point” or “performance gap.” Identify which needs are going unfulfilled in your industry or in your local market. The need or gap that exists between the current situation and the desired objective is sometimes termed a *performance gap*. Many businesses succeed by basing their USP on industry performance gaps.

Learn about the most frustrating things your customer experiences when working with you or your industry in general. Use your USP to alleviate that pain and make sure that you deliver on your promises.

Step 4: Be specific and offer proof. Consumers are generally skeptical of advertising claims. Alleviate their skepticism by being specific and, where possible, offering proof. For example, “You’ll lose 10 pounds in 60 days or your money back!”

Step 5: Condense your USP into one clear and concise sentence. The most powerful USPs are so well written that you would not change or even move a single word. After you have composed your USP, your advertising and marketing copy will practically write itself.

Step 6: Integrate your USP into your website and all marketing materials. Besides your website, you should include variations of your USP in *all* of your marketing materials, including:

- Advertising and sales copy headlines
- Business cards, brochures, flyers, and signs
- Your “elevator pitch,” phone, and sales scripts
- Letterhead, letters, postcards, and calendars

Your slogan can be an abbreviated version of your USP, or the whole phrase.

Step 7: Deliver on your USP’s promise. Be bold when developing your USP, but be careful to ensure that you can deliver. Your USP should have promises and guarantees that capture your audience’s attention and compel them to respond. In the beginning, it was a challenge for FedEx to absolutely, positively deliver overnight, but the company subsequently developed the system that allowed it to consistently deliver on the promise.

Planning

Now that you know what the profiles of your visitors look like and what information they need to make a buying decision on your website, the next step is *planning* your website. Planning includes the following steps:

1. Creating the redesign plan
2. Planning your website design and color scheme

Step 1: Create the redesign plan: planning your site architecture

Site planning includes specifying which web pages are needed and how they are organized. It also establishes the paths that your visitors will take through your website. One way to start this is to jot down a site map containing a line-item list of web pages that your website will contain.

For a website that sells expensive business solutions or enterprise software, your site map might look like this:

- Home Page
- About Us
 - Company history
 - Management staff
 - Employment opportunities

- Contact Us
- Solutions for IT Professionals
 - Network management solutions
 - Enterprise information system (EIS)
 - Electronic data interchange (EDI)
- Solutions for Financial Officers
 - General ledger software
 - Fixed assets software
- Solutions for Marketing and Sales Departments
 - How marketing can boost leads
 - Marketing Tool 1
 - Marketing Tool 2
 - Marketing Tool 3
 - Marketing Tool 4
 - How the sales force can increase sales
 - Sales Tool 1
 - Sales Tool 2
 - Sales Tool 3
 - Sales Tool 4
- Lead Generator: White Paper
- Lead Generator: Webinar

Map out every page of your web site with these things in mind:

- Which visitor profiles are likely to visit each web page?
- Which specific keywords might they use at the search engines to get there?
- What sorts of questions does the prospect who has landed on that page need to have answered?
- What specific strategy will the web page take to answer these questions?
- What actions might each profile take next?

Step 2: Plan your website design and color scheme

The colors that you use for your website will influence your visitors. Your color scheme will cause your visitors to react to your website either positively or negatively. Picking the wrong colors can sound a red-alert alarm in your visitors' psyches and send them scurrying for cover. This results in high bail-out rates and plummeting conversion rates.

Identifying your customers' personalities and personas will allow you to pick the colors that they prefer. For example, IBM knows its customers are buyers of serious computer hardware, software, and high-end consulting services. It chose the more serious blue and black color scheme to communicate more credibility and trust, and uses this color scheme and style in its website design to unify all of its marketing materials (see Figure 5-8).

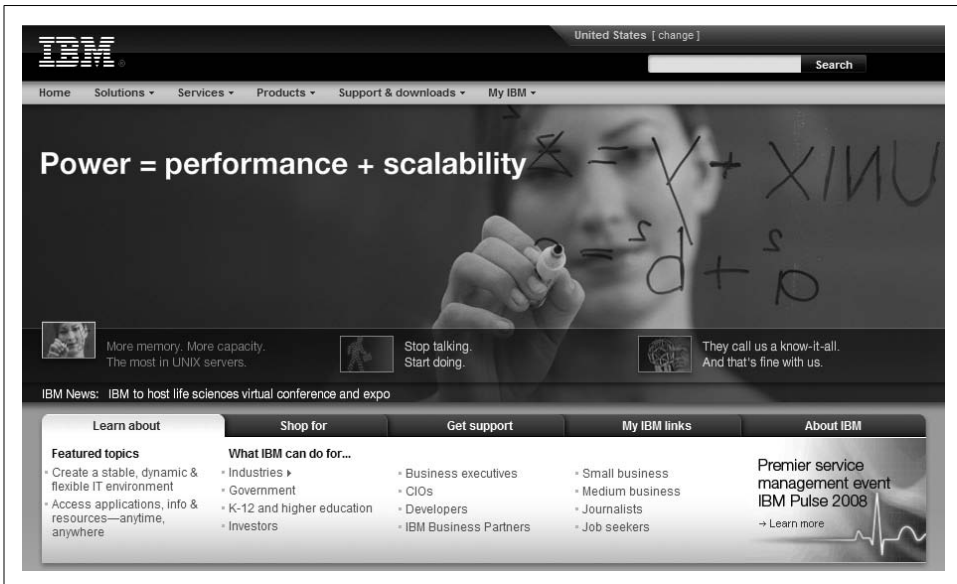


Figure 5-8. IBM.com home page

PartyCity.com knows its customers are party animals. Its customers want to ensure that their parties are bright, cheery, and fun, so PartyCity chose to use bright and fun colors such as red, green, bright blue, and even pink! (See Figure 5-9.)

Once you've tailored the colors to the psychological moods of your target audience, the end result will transform your website into a powerful tool to appeal to and draw your prospects in like a magnet.

Optimization

After discovery and planning, the *optimization* phase is where you create a site plan that is complete with information architecture and personas. In this phase, you'll create web template mockups to finalize effective layouts. You'll write targeted persuasive copy, headlines, and offers. You'll put your USP into action with a winning slogan and initial body copy. Finally, you'll optimize your conversion paths and progressively improve conversion rates by testing different alternatives.

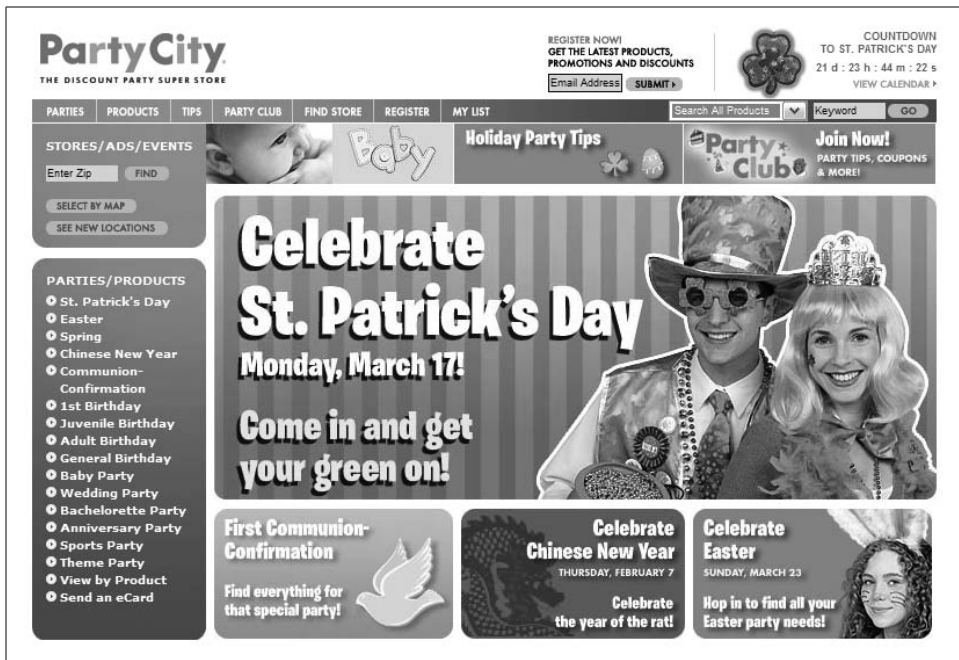


Figure 5-9. PartyCity.com home page

Optimize with persuasive copywriting

Persuasive copywriting is the key to website success. Your words must inform, *excite*, and persuade your visitors to take action. To persuade, your words must be relevant to your visitors' needs. To achieve relevance, you must orient your content to the users' point of view and give them what they want.

Be brief. Be bold and inject personality into your prose. Stand out from the crowd by surprising them with unexpected words, ideas, and an ironclad guarantee. Be relevant. Make your offer irresistible.

Your customers are busy, and your copy must grab their attention quickly, as people spend only a fraction of a second evaluating your pages. Turbo-charge your words to make them sparkle and persuade.

Effective copy has a number of unique characteristics:

- It appeals to the *value hierarchies* of your customers.
- It includes *benefit-oriented* headlines and content.
- It contains primary and secondary *calls to action*.
- It uses effective and accepted *writing techniques*.
- It incorporates the *six persuaders*.

Appeal to the value hierarchies of your customers. Psychologists use *value hierarchies* to help them understand what is important to individuals.³³ Value hierarchies *frame* the most important value that your company’s product or service offers to customers. By focusing on *what matters most* to your customers, you’ll keep your content *relevant*.

Create benefit-oriented content. Benefit-oriented content directly addresses the value hierarchies of customers by showing *how* your products and services will fulfill your prospects’ needs. Your copy should emphasize, amplify, and illuminate the benefits of your products and services. Saturate your copy with benefits and avoid feature-oriented copy.

There are some exceptions. The type of copy that you use in your site depends on your target market. In the computer parts industry, for example, features and specifications are frequently more important than value-oriented copy. Most OEMs and retailers offer their value-oriented content as the default view, with tabs or links to detailed lists of features and specifications. Often, a particular new feature will dominate the marketing for a particular product. As a rule, follow the standards and expectations of your industry and market.

Write engaging headlines and copy. Your headlines need to appear to be relevant to your visitors to catch their attention. Enticing headlines will lure more people to your site because they also appear off-site in RSS feeds and resultant news stories.

Make your headlines short, punchy summaries of the important topic that follows. Omit articles and quantifiers (*a, an, and, the*) and use subject/noun/verb combinations in newspaper style.

Here are some tips for writing engaging headlines that convert:

- *Include keyword phrases* in the headline when optimizing for search engines or bidding in a pay-per-click (PPC) campaign. This can help you rank higher in the search engines and shows visitors from your PPC campaign that the web page is relevant.
- *Highlight the benefits* with effective headlines that explicitly tell your visitors the benefits of your website, product, or service. For example, FabricWorkroom.com’s headline summarizes its products and benefits: “Shop FabricWorkroom.com for Custom Home Decor and Designer Fabrics at Discount Prices.”
- *Front-load keywords* in headlines for better keyword prominence and scanning. In general, active voice is strongest for ad copy. For SEO purposes, however, passive voice can help to front-load headlines with keywords.³⁴ Users often scan only the first two words in headlines, subheads, summaries, captions, links, and bulleted lists, so make the first two words count.

³³Mentzer, J. et al. 1997. “Application of the means-end value hierarchy model to understanding logistics service value.” *International Journal of Physical Distribution & Logistics Management* 27 (9/10): 630–643.

³⁴Nielsen, J. October 22, 2007. “Passive Voice Is Redeemed for Web Headings.” *Alertbox*, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/passive-voice.html> (accessed February 17, 2008).

- *Use action-oriented copy* to tell visitors what they should do on your web page. For example, if you are offering a white paper for download on your landing page, tell your visitors to download the white paper in your headline. Simple, yes, but effective.
- *Arouse curiosity* so that your visitors are compelled to read further. Your headlines should leave your readers asking “How?” as their curiosity gets the better of them. For example: “How to Increase Your Landing Page Conversion Rates by 50% to 200%.”
- *State only the facts* in your headline. Often, this is the best approach to take. For example, here is a headline for a Fluke Instruments product: “The Fluke VR1710 Voltage Quality Recorder Offers an Easy-to-Use Solution for Detecting Power Quality Problems.”
- *Use an editorial style* to write ads that don’t sound like ads. Writing headlines (and content) in an editorial style (similar to a newspaper story) can be the best way to capture the attention of your visitors and keep them reading. For example: “New VoIP Service Saves Homeowners Hundreds of Dollars in Phone Charges per Year.”
- *Use subheadlines* directly underneath your headline to provide an additional place to improve conversions by adding and amplifying benefits to your web pages. Subheads are also a great place to include keywords for SEO. Jakob Nielsen recommends that headline writers “reduce duplication of salient keywords” in subheadlines and decks to increase the number of keywords that users scan.³⁵ Because users often read only the first couple of words in each text element, the use of different keywords in subheads and decks improves relevance and potential search engine rankings.
- *Test and retest* because headlines account for such a significant opportunity for increasing your conversion rate. Use A/B split-testing or multivariate software to test multiple headlines to find the one that improves your conversion rate the most.

Here are some tips for writing engaging copy:

Start (and end) each paragraph with a bang

The first and last sentences of your paragraphs should pop. Pack your paragraphs with benefits to arouse your readers’ interest and compel them to take action on your web pages. Design your copy so that readers can scan it quickly.

Include calls to action when writing links, buttons, and offers

Your calls to action are the offers that you use to compel your visitors to take a desired action on your website. These actions can be to purchase a product or service, to sign up and become a lead for your sales team, or to “opt in” with an email address to learn more about a product so that you can market to them.

³⁵Ibid.

Use action words and expressions in your hyperlinks

This causes visitors to click. Examples of action words and expressions are “Buy now for a 15% discount,” “Discover...,” “Learn how to...,” “Click here to...,” “Sign up for...,” and “Search.”

Use primary responses and secondary or back-up responses

The primary response to a website that you want is usually to purchase your product or become a lead. But for every one person who responds this way, there are usually 10 others who *almost* bought or *almost* clicked but never connected.

Develop ways to move these almost-buyers or almost-leads closer to a sale with backup responses

Perhaps your visitor is not ready to buy just now but would like to know about your future monthly specials. All he has to do is sign up for your free newsletter, or a similar backup response that you offer him.

Test descriptive text in your buttons

This will increase your conversions. Instead of using the standard “Submit” wording on buttons, use more descriptive text such as “Download now” to increase conversion rates. Button text is a good candidate for A/B split-testing.

Adopt a writing style. Your writing style affects your conversion rates. Be consistent throughout your online writing to build customer confidence and reduce customers’ perceived risk of buying from your company. Use the personas you have developed to target your writing toward your audience.

Pain versus gain

People are more likely to avoid loss than they are to accept gains.³⁶ People don’t like to lose their freedoms, and will fight to retain them.³⁷ You can either approach your copy from a positive, benefit-oriented perspective, or show your visitors what they’ll lose if they don’t go with your company.

Past, present, or future tense

Present tense talks about what is happening now. Present tense is more immediate and engaging—for example, “I am optimizing.” Past tense (“I have optimized”) and future tense (“I will optimize”) are less engaging.

You, me, and them

Put yourself in your users’ shoes and talk directly to them about how your products and services can help them make their lives better. First person is from the perspective of the writer: “I am optimizing.” Second person takes the perspective of the reader: “You are optimizing.” A second person pronoun directly addresses *your* readers and is the most engaging.

³⁶Fiske, S. 1980. “Attention and weight in person perception: The impact of negative and extreme behavior.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 38 (6): 889–906.

³⁷Cialdini. *Influence: Science and Practice*, 215.

Be consistent

Build trust by being consistent and reliable in your communications with prospects. Avoid changing voice, tense, or pronouns in the middle of your pages. It confuses the reader.

Effective writing techniques. You can use a number of proven copywriting techniques to spice up your site. Use poetic meter, vary word choice and sentence length, appeal to emotions, and surprise your readers with sparkling verse and unexpected words. Of course, the effectiveness of these techniques will depend on your audience; again, use your personas to tailor copy.

Use verbs and active voice

Strong verbs have more impact than adverbs and adjectives. Sprinkle your prose with powerful verbs to give your words momentum and verve. Use active voice (“He optimized the copy”) for copy, rather than passive voice (“The copy was optimized”). Passive voice is less engaging and more confusing to your reader. However, as discussed earlier, for shorter headlines, subheads, and bullet points, passive voice can be useful in some cases.

Tug emotions through effective mental imaging

Paint a picture of how your customers will benefit from your offerings. Effective writers don’t describe what their characters look like, they describe key specifics about what the characters do, see, and hear. Our minds fill in the rest of the picture.

Write for scanning

People don’t *read* very much online. They skim and scan, foraging for useful information.³⁸ To make your content easy to scan, break your copy into discrete, subject-size chunks. Use short, punchy paragraphs to make your points with:

- Half the word count
- Meaningful headlines and subheads
- Highlighted keywords
- Bulleted lists
- One idea per paragraph

Emphasize the highlights

Emphasize the most important sections of your copy, using bold and italics to highlight important phrases. Emphasis helps your readers pick up the gist of your page as they scan. You should arrange your highlighted phrases so that readers skimming them will understand your story in brief.

³⁸Nielsen, J. May 6, 2008. “How Little Do Users Read?” Alertbox, <http://www.useit.com/alertbox/percent-text-read.html> (accessed June 7, 2008).

Avoid jargon and hype

Using insider jargon erects a barrier to reader flow. Avoid hype when describing your offerings—your visitors are highly skilled at detecting it. Instead, use clear, specific wording and make claims you can back up.

Use testimonials

Testimonials lend your offerings credibility through social proof. Learning what other people think of your book (Amazon), product, or service lends credibility to your company statements.

Don't be a wimp

Don't go halfway and say this *could*, *should*, *may*, or *might* happen. Be positive! Say that this will *absolutely* happen when visitors give you their credit card. Visitors need to be confident in their decisions and need to perceive that buying is a low-risk operation.

Offer a guarantee

Customers want to reduce the risk of their investments. One way to remove an objection is to offer an iron-clad money-back guarantee. By reducing their risk, you increase confidence, which makes it more likely that your visitors will buy.

Ask for the order

Asking your prospective customers to place an order is an obvious point, but you'd be surprised how often this is omitted.

Use graphics to enhance the sales experience

Finally, adding high-quality graphics that depict the actual product or service can enhance your conversion rates. Avoid generic graphics such as clip art or stock images that are unrelated to your offerings. Actual high-quality product shots are best.

You can use the six persuaders you read about earlier in combination with these writing techniques to create powerful prose that elicits action from your visitors.

Put it on paper and build graphical mockups

As Kelly Goto and Emily Cotler describe in their book *Web Redesign 2.0: Workflow That Works* (Peachpit Press), by creating wireframes and paper prototypes, you can make changes quickly without tying up your design team. You can use Fireworks for rapid prototyping, or Dreamweaver, which offers more functionality. In general, Adobe Creative Suite (Photoshop, Illustrator, etc.) is effective for mocking up prototypes and wireframe models.

Wireframe web templates and mockups to finalize “look and feel.” Create mockups of optimized templates that follow popular website conventions, such as top navigation. Put important content above the fold, the logo and tagline on the top left, and contact information in the top right. (For more details, check out Jakob Nielsen and Marie Tahir's *Homepage Usability: 50 Websites Deconstructed* [New Riders].) This wireframe layout shows what elements will appear where on your pages (see Figure 5-10).

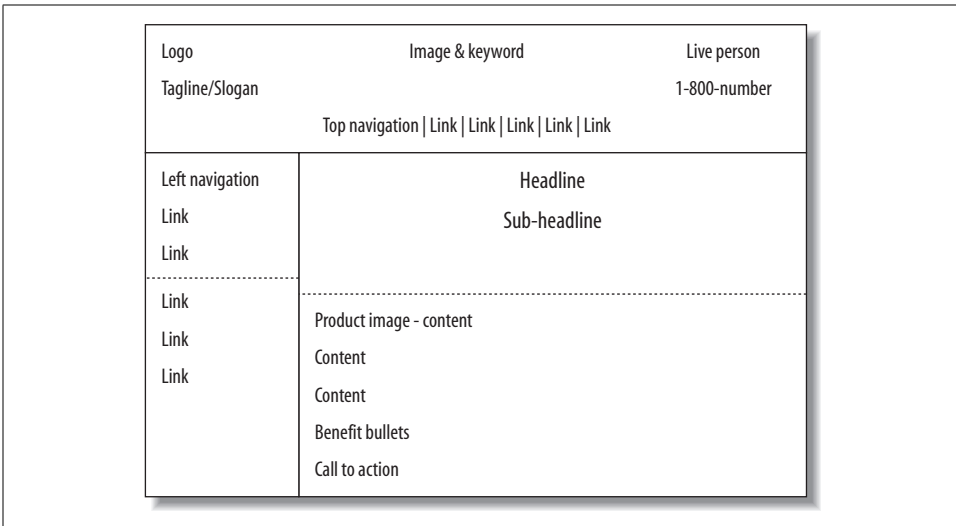


Figure 5-10. Wireframe layout

There are several types of web pages to optimize: home, lead generation, direct sales, and e-commerce product and category pages. Overall, you can apply the same principles described earlier to each page type.

MyWeddingFavors.com is an example of a well-optimized home page that includes most of the conversion builders we’ve discussed (see Figure 5-11).

MyWeddingFavors.com uses:

- Professional design and colors optimized for its target market
- Intuitive navigation
- Logo and USP in the top-left corner
- Contact information and Live Chat in the upper-right corner
- Testimonials/credibility builders such as third-party HACKER SAFE logos
- “Hero shots” of top products or services above the fold
- Calls to action

One addition would improve the MyWeddingFavors.com home page: a privacy policy displayed directly below the signup form.

Taking a different approach are sales teams for companies that sell complex or expensive products or services, such as legal services, business software, dental services, or advertising, which mainly use lead generation. Lead generation pages get website visitors to accept a free offer (such as free information or a white paper) and to fill out a form with their contact information. The form generates the lead that the sales team can then use to cultivate a relationship and close a sale.

The screenshot shows the MyWeddingFavors.com homepage. At the top left is the logo and tagline: "MyWeddingFavors high quality, unique wedding favors that reflect your personal style". To the right is contact information: "Questions? Call us toll free: 1-866-942-1311 8am to 8pm EST Mon.-Fri." and a "LIVE CHAT OFFLINE" button with a "HACKER SAFE" badge. Below the header is a navigation bar with buttons for "Search", "Home", "New Items", "About Us", "Order Info", "Contact Us", and "Shopping Cart".

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Featured Favors:** A list of favor categories including Unique Wedding Favors, Personalized Mint Tins, Bridal Shower Favors, Beach Wedding Favors, Candle Wedding Favors, Place Card Holders, Elegant Wedding Favors, Personalized Favors, Personality Favors, and Practical Favors.
- Favors by Season:** Spring, Summer, Fall, and Winter Wedding Favors.
- Favors by Theme:** Fairy Tale, Wine, Asian, Coffee and Tea, Garden, Las Vegas, and Golf Wedding Favors.
- Favors by Price:** Red Tag Deals!, Under \$2.00 Favors, and Under \$3.00 Favors.
- Favors by Type:** Boxes, Bags and Ribbon; Cookies and Chocolates; and Glass and Crystal Wedding.

The central part of the page features a "favor finder" section with a search bar and filters for "Shop by Bridal Style", "Shop by Color", and "Shop by Price". Below this are radio button options for "Classic Elegance", "Sophisticated Glamour", "Wild at Heart", "Fairy Tale Princess", and "Total Romantic".

Below the "favor finder" are three "View" buttons for "Seasonal Favors", "Best Sellers", and "Personality Favors".

The bottom section is titled "featured favors" and displays three products:

- Good Wishes Pearlized Photo Coasters:** Price: As low as \$1.64
- "Love... Let Me Count the Ways" Heart-Shaped Calculator:** Price: As low as \$2.95
- Elegant Arc Photo Frame and Placeholder:** Price: As low as \$1.30

Figure 5-11. Conversion elements integrated into the MyWeddingFavors.com home page

Advertising in these lucrative and competitive markets can be expensive. Therefore, your lead generation page must be optimized to maximize conversions (leads) to generate an ROI for your advertising budget. For example, advertising on Google AdWords for the hyper-competitive keywords *human resources software* can cost upward of \$10 *per click*! Some conversion builders to include on your lead generation pages are:

- Professional design and colors optimized for your target market
- No navigation to keep visitors on the page instead of clicking away
- Logo and USP in the top-left corner
- Contact information in the upper-right corner
- Benefit-oriented headline optimized with keywords used in Google AdWords ad
- Benefit-oriented copy with benefit bullets
- Testimonials and credibility builders

- Privacy policy (ideally placed under the signup form)
- Hero shots of the product or service above the fold
- A compelling offer (such as a free white paper or consultation)
- A lead generation form

A software provider with a website called UltimateSoftware.com uses the lead generation page shown in Figure 5-12, which includes most of these conversion builders.



Figure 5-12. Ultimate Software's lead generation page

Optimize your conversion paths to get the click

Optimizing the steps that visitors take on their way to conversion can yield significant improvements in your website's conversion rates (see Chapter 4 for an example). A *conversion path* or *conversion funnel* is a path that a visitor takes from entering your website to the point where the visitor becomes a conversion in the form of a sale or lead (see Figure 5-13).

How efficient is your website at getting visitors to click from your home page to the most important interior page or pages? Are your most popular products (or services) featured prominently on your home page with persuasive headlines, descriptive copy, and enticing product images? Optimize your website's conversion paths and increase your sales.

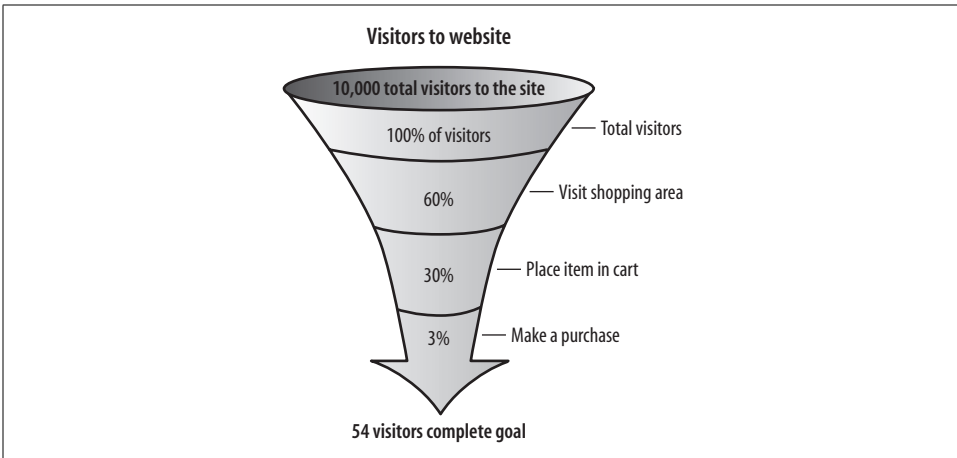


Figure 5-13. Conversion funnel

Google Analytics provides Funnel and Navigation Reports, which help you simplify the checkout process of your website (see Figure 5-14).

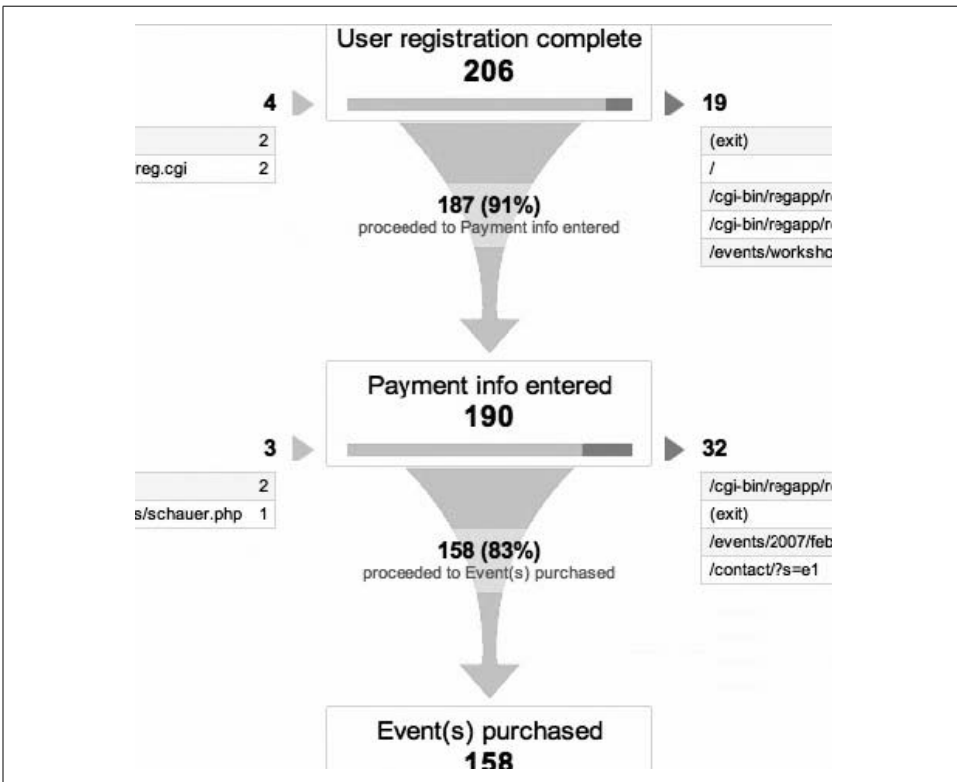


Figure 5-14. Google Analytics' Funnel and Navigation Report

This report shows how many of your website visitors enter the conversion funnel and how many actually make it to the end. This report also shows where your visitors go if they drop out of the process. This can help you identify and correct obstacles to conversion.

For more details on optimizing your site with web metrics, including Google Website Optimizer, see Chapter 10.

Test Everything

Successful sites test everything to maximize ROI. They test alternative headlines, call-to-action text, body copy, images, page component layout and design, text color, link text, and landing pages. They use tools to compare those alternatives, such as Google's Website Optimizer to conduct multivariate tests and A/B split-testing to find out which combinations work best to maximize conversion rates. One company selling an expensive product enjoyed a tenfold increase in its CTR by changing the text in a button from "Buy Online" to "Price and Buy."³⁹ It pays to test.

You can read about these testing methods and tools in Chapter 10.

Summary

CRO turns your website into a veritable persuasion machine. Sites that are conversion-optimized squeeze more leads, sales, and opt-ins from their visitors. CRO uses benefit-oriented persuasive copywriting and credibility-based web design to *influence* visitors to accept your message and comply with your requests. Benefit-oriented copy appeals to your visitors' emotions and meets their needs, which increases their desire. By combining desire, confidence, and trust-building elements such as testimonials, credibility-based professional design, and third-party badges, you will convert more of your prospects into buyers.

This chapter detailed some of the best practices that improve conversion rates. You also learned how to write persuasive copy, what the six persuaders are, and what our automatic response is to source credibility. You can maximize your conversion rate by testing different elements against one another with specialized tools. The most important factors for high conversion rates are:

- Credibility-based professional design optimized for your target market
- Credibility-based logo and memorable USP/slogan in the top-left corner
- Intuitive navigation
- Contact information, form, and/or Live Chat in the upper-right corner

³⁹Weischedel, B., and E. Huizingh. 2006. "Website Optimization with Web Metrics: A Case Study." In *ICEC 2006* (Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada: August 14–16, 2006), 463–470.

- The use of personas with tailored copy and trigger words for each customer personality type
- Persuasive, benefit-oriented copy and headlines (reflect keywords in PPC ads)
- Fast response times for browsers and queries
- Clear primary and secondary calls to action
- Useful engagement devices
- Illustrative product or service images—“hero shots” above the fold
- Testimonials, credibility builders (e-seals), and risk reversers (100% guarantee)
- No presentation flaws
- Privacy policy (ideally placed under the input form)
- Testing, tracking, and design iteration

To purchase the book go to <http://oreilly.com/catalog/9780596515089/index.html>



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