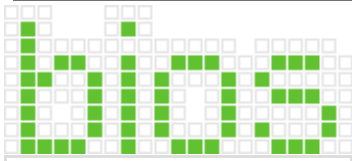


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26 November 2004

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E-retailers Need to Oil Shopping Trolleys Ahead of Christmas Rush, Study Finds

Topic: Internet

Manufacturer: [SciVisum](#)

Submitter: [Rainier PR](#)

Published: 22.11.04

In the run up to Christmas, UK web sites are not prepared to handle the predicted surge in demand from consumers. Despite warnings, the majority of e-retail sites have failed to prepare their infrastructure for the busiest time in the annual retail calendar and risk losing millions of pounds in lost sales as a result of consumer frustrations.

These are the key findings of the SciVisum Christmas Ecommerce Performance Study 2004, undertaken over a four-week period in October by web testing specialist SciVisum.

In a comparative study undertaken six months ago SciVisum showed that the erratic functionality of online shopping carts was leading to consumer frustration. Since then the performance of shopping carts has degraded increasing the risk of e-consumers being left stranded at the checkout this Christmas at the UK's leading online stores.

Shopping carts are providing consumers with a less predictable and an increasingly unsatisfactory experience than six months ago.

SciVisum found that the accumulative period during which e-consumers are prevented from making purchases on UK web sites has increased from 9 hours 30 minutes per month, to 9 hours 48 minutes per month.

Showing an increase over the 80 per cent from the previous analysis, 84 per cent of web sites now perform inconsistently with widely varying response times, timeouts and errors- leaving a large number of consumers at best wondering what to do next, and at worst, unable to complete their purchase successfully.

Assuming the 31 UK online retailers in the survey are representative, then the sector as a whole is losing a combined £18 million revenue per month due to shopping trolley errors (based on 20 million UK Shoppers spending £17bn online this year - Interactive Media Retail Group (IMRG) figures).

The SciVisum Christmas Ecommerce Performance Study 2004 conducted 24/7 monitoring of the online buying process on UK retail web sites over a period of one month during October and examined how this compared to the performance of shopping carts in March.

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On average UK shopping carts continued to remain out of action for more than ten times the accepted industry standard of 99.9 per cent performance, (99.9% equates to a maximum of 43 minutes of accumulated failures a month.

SciVisum found that 13 per cent did not function for an equivalent of 12 hours a day during the month 10 per cent failed for an equivalent of 24 hours during the month resulting in over three quarters still failing to meet the industry standard.

A well-known women's fashion retailer had shopping carts that failed to work for 60 hours during the study, making it the worst performer. The Gadget Shop (<http://www.gadgetshop.co.uk>) provided the most consistent performance with only 12 minutes of downtime in the month.

"Last year e-retailers cashed in a cracking £2.5billion at Christmas, and this year we expect this figure to soar with over 20 million UK shoppers expecting to splurge online during the festive season. The way to ensure you have a good online shopping experience is to always look out for the ISIS logo (<http://www.imrg.org/ISIS>) which shows that the shop is registered with the official industry backed and Government endorsed merchant accreditation scheme," said James Roper, CEO, Interactive Media In Retail Group.

"Once bitten should be twice shy, but as festive shoppers head for online stores, the SciVisum study reveals that e-retailers continue to turn a blind eye to the key functionality problems plaguing their web sites," said Deri Jones, CEO, SciVisum.

"It is shocking that the functionality of shopping carts has degraded. E-retailers can expect a season of bad will from consumers if they don't take action now to address the problem in the coming month."

"The lack of improvement is partly down to the continued industry ignorance over the important difference between web sites just being online and doing business. Web sites with available home pages are still often plagued with hidden functionality problems that prevent them from performing critical business tasks such as sales transactions - in particular those that require handling a higher number of user steps in succession.

Buying a product/service from a web site engages the user in the highest number of user steps and this is where web site owners are most likely to be blind to functionality problems in the user journey and also where they are most likely to lose potential revenue impacting profitability. Web site owners need to deploy complex monitoring throughout the purchasing journey to access the full scale of the problem," added Jones.

The 31 leading UK ecommerce web sites tested included retailers of music, books and videos (18 per cent), clothing and fashion (23 per cent), catalogue department stores (22 per cent), consumables and electrical equipment (14 per cent). The remaining 23 per cent of web sites tested consisted of web sites selling DIY products, mobile phones and cameras.

#### Methodology

The SciVisum Christmas Ecommerce Performance Study 2004 tested the online buying process, specifically the 'add to cart/basket' function of over 30 of the UK's leading e-retailers every 10 minutes for a period of four weeks during October 2004. It compared the results with the same

study conducted six months previously during April 2004 in the first SciVisum Ecommerce Performance Study 2004.

Two measures were used to profile shopping cart functionality - HTTP errors and response time. These highlight the two main failure areas: HTTP errors, which make it impossible for an e-consumer to complete a purchase; and response times greater than 30 seconds for HTML download, causing the majority of e-consumers to abandon the transaction or assume an error has occurred. The entire purchase process was tracked but only the last step of the transaction process was profiled in the study.

HTTP errors (causing more serious problems for consumers) rather than timeouts were the major cause for shopping cart failure. This contrasts with the misconception that slow page delivery and timeouts not HTTP failures are the main deterioration that occurs when systems are under heavy load.

#### Recommendations

Based on the findings, SciVisum made a number of broad recommendations to improve the 'add to cart/basket' function of web sites:

1. Simple uptime/downtime monitoring of your home page and/or a few main pages simply won't reveal how the shopping transactions are behaving - 24/7 functional monitoring, running multi-page User Journeys that mimic real users' product finding and purchasing transactions on-line is what is required.
2. Review key transactions such as the 'add to cart' function of your website - to ensure that the server and database load is kept to a minimum. Firstly strip any HTTP 'POST' data down so that only essential variables are passed within it, such as the product part number; and secondly avoid adding or changing cookies at this crucial stage of the purchase process.
3. Analyse web systems for 'database locking' type flaws, (e.g. is there is a limit on how many users can concurrently add a database line representing their purchases) which can confusingly produce errors at load levels well below the capacity of the server hardware, which makes it hard for the IT team to identify the problem
4. Be aware that although 'add to cart' functions may perform well in 'once off' or 'normal use' testing, only simulated-user load/stress testing of the functionality will expose underlying problems that cause more sporadic failures; even 1% failure during busy periods is 10 times higher than 99.9% Service Level Agreement requires.
5. Whether managed in-house or out-sourced - your web site is likely evolving and changing all the time, to respond to marketing demands, and to add to capacity and performance- these changes often cause inadvertent decline in user experience and transactional effectiveness.

Thus the IT and marketing team managers should agree an ongoing program of testing and monitoring, to allow evidence-based decision making on future upgrades; the test regime should include 24/7 functional monitoring, regular stress tests, perhaps twice-yearly, and ad hoc trouble-shooting audits say yearly to ensure the overall design and infrastructure is not losing it's edge.

The SciVisum Christmas Ecommerce Performance Study 2004 management report can be requested from the following website:  
<http://www.scivisum.co.uk/report/ChristmasEcommerce/index.htm>

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#### About SciVisum

SciVisum is a UK based web site testing specialist delivering engineered testing services to help organisations measure and improve the performance and functionality of business critical web based systems. The company's in-house research and development, test expertise and web-focused test methodologies enable uniquely thorough testing and monitoring of complex web applications.

Test services include: Load testing /Stress testing: SV-Load; 24/7 functional monitoring: SV-Monitor; Functionality audit and consultancy: SV-Function; Accessibility testing: SV-Access.

SciVisum are independent of all web technology providers, and do not build or manage web sites.

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