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## **OS Commerce – How open source eCommerce may change the playing field**

By Craig Smith

### **Executive Summary**

eCommerce platforms are being commoditized. Enterprise level solutions are coming down in price and new open source solutions are being made available to anyone with an internet connection for free.

The most robust of these open source solutions is OS Commerce (OSC) – a community driven eCommerce solution that is flexible, scalable, and user friendly. As eCommerce becomes even more a part of mainstream retail, OSC will provide businesses of all shapes and sizes with the functionality and capabilities of the big boys. This brief examines some of the advantages of OS Commerce and provides insights into how it can help your business.

There is no such thing as a **free** lunch for small businesses.

Maybe so, but you CAN get an eCommerce platform for nothing. Offered for **free** at [www.oscommerce.com](http://www.oscommerce.com), this eCommerce solution provides its share of bells and whistles while providing a user friendly interface to manage the administrative portions of the store. The platform is based in the PHP scripting language and runs on the Apache web server – a user also needs access to a SQL database to initially upload the files that manage the categories and products within the admin section.

Now that sounds complicated and ultra techie, but really anyone can do it with some concentrated effort. Much of the documentation online regarding OS is very thorough and provides step-by-step plans on how to get your store up and running. Any newbie to this type of work will likely come across some roadblocks, but the OS Commerce community forums are only a click away to start trouble shooting.

The solution is driven a community of users, meaning that like minded OSC developers are ready to help out their peers by answering posted questions. At times this can be frustrating when waiting for an answer, but it is rewarding to overcome a technology bug on your own without having to pay for support.

### **Contribute to the Cause**

The best part of OSC is the number of "contributions" (i.e. functionality modules) that can be added to your site at any time. Again, there is no cost for these enhancements and upgrades – just the need to be patient in your installations. In most cases, contributions are located on the **OScommerce community section** of the website and are downloadable via zip files. After opening the file, read the "read me" file which will walk you through the file additions, subtractions, and code changes needed to make your enhancement work properly. When you explore the OS platform be sure to upgrade with the following contributions as they are must haves.

### **Ultimate SEO URL's**

This cool contribution allows the site owner to create static URL's within a database driven platform. This will dramatically help your site's search saturation as more pages will be able to be indexed easier by the search engines. It's no secret that search spiders are attracted to traditional urls more than dynamic urls and this contribution well help achieve that relieve the problem of getting your static url's indexed.

### **Easy Populate**

No need to input product data manually, this contribution allows you to import data from a basic excel file into your store. A true timesaver! You can also integrate with data feeds from drop ship providers so you never have to look up inventory levels or change site product content again – once it is loaded it is automated.

### **Featured Products**

If you have an ecommerce store – certain products are more attractive to sell than others. This contribution allows you to tailor the featured products that you want to showcase within both your home and category pages.

### **Final Thoughts on OSC**

Myself, I am a marketer. But after learning OS I really feel like I have some programmer blood in me. This platform is easy to use and perfect for a small to medium size business to get their store online. Yes, there will be headaches along the way, but stay with it and you will overcome them and soon you will have an ecommerce store that looks great and is fully functional.