

11 Best practices for your eCommerce checkout process

When it comes to frictionless and accurate contact data capture





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Your shopping basket isn't only a place that captures a transaction - it's a place where you, as a retailer, have the opportunity to deliver an exceptional and easy customer experience.

To fulfill the purpose of your shopping basket and provide an easy-to-navigate customer journey, start by reducing basket abandonment and accurately collecting some of the most important inputs of the checkout process: the contact data.

Basket abandonment rate is a key statistic to understand when designing eCommerce website checkout pages. Abandonment rates by industry, as recorded by Statista¹, can be as high as 96.8 percent for automotive sites, while other sectors such as travel or insurance experience rates closer to 70 percent. Mobile phone basket abandonment rates are higher than PC rates. On average, it is estimated that about two thirds of all baskets are abandoned after a product has been placed in them.

There are many reasons why this may happen. The potential purchaser could:

- Be surprised by product availability, shipping costs, or delivery time
- Simply be researching to understand the full, extended price of a particular purchase without intending to buy at the time
- Or, simply find the checkout process too long and complex.

As a general rule, the longer the checkout process takes, the higher the likelihood of abandonment. This is why eCommerce industry leaders, such as Amazon.com, offer a "one click" purchase process for their registered members. Member contact and payment details are already stored, so there's no need to ask again.

However, there are more questions that arise when it comes to the checkout process. What does this mean for non-registered members shopping basket journey? How should you approach checkout design for first time customers? And, most importantly, how should you design the checkout contact data form to accurately capture the vital information you need for successful notifications and product shipments and to avoid courier address correction fees, while minimising complexity and friction in the checkout process?

The costs of having an overly complex checkout process on top of capturing unreliable contact data are high. You are spending unnecessarily on address correction fees and other shipping charges, to begin with. Additionally, you could be increasing the risk of basket abandonment as well as:

- Loss of reputation
- Decreased customer satisfaction
- Increased call centre traffic
- Incurring lost product replacement costs
- Wasted time and resources.

It's time to reverse the risk and design a brilliant checkout process that is easy-to-use for your consumers and that captures accurate contact data for your business.

[Here are Experian's recommended top 11 best practices for your checkout process.](#)

Note: the best practices apply primarily to UK ecommerce sites. The requirements for international sites may differ.

1. Always offer guest checkout as the default

Asking first time customers to create an account requires a significant amount of time that could slow the checkout process. Think: If a customer signs up for an account, then the customer needs to create a new password and fill in account information that is required.

The customer may feel that some of the information you are asking for, like a phone number, is unnecessary. They're wondering: Why does this retailer need my phone number to have a product delivered?

Tips

- Collect the information that is solely needed to make the purchase - contact information like an email, phone number, and delivery address, and payment information.
- After customers have clicked the "purchase" button, encourage undecided customers to sign up for membership.
- Justify why you need the phone number by providing a brief explanation. (e.g. "A phone number is required by our courier to contact you if they are unable to deliver for any reason.")

2. Minimise the number of required fields

The more form fields there are to complete the longer the process and the greater the potential for confusion and abandonment.

Tips

- Leave fields like 'title' (Mr/Mrs/Dr.) and County out. These fields are not necessary in the UK for package delivery.
- Do not break the address field down. (i.e. separate fields for house number, apartment number, etc.)
- Use a reliable back-end processing or automation system to parse the information needed for data collection and minimise the number of fields you require visitors to complete.
- Label the address field 'address line 1' or similar versus 'street address.' In rural areas, mail may be addressed according to the mail route rather than the physical street address and route designations may not fit the generally accepted format or concept of "street address". Neither do PO Box numbers.



3. Allow free text in contact fields

Requiring that visitors conform to specific formats (area code) (e.g. 020), may ensure that data is structured correctly for your database but will confuse customers whose data doesn't conform, causing friction and chancing abandonment.

In the case of telephone numbers, it's increasingly likely in today's connected world that you may have international consumers who wish to place orders for domestic delivery. They'll need to add a country code to their number which may not conform to your predetermined format.

Tips

- When determining the field size, like number of characters allowed or viewable per field, try not to be overly restrictive or too expansive.
- Allow free text input and use the size of the input field to indicate the amount of information required.
- Adjust the format in the back end to meet your specific needs.
- Allow free text into contact fields (but don't exceed your couriers' character limits). Different couriers have different character limits for Address Line 1 and Address Line 2.

4. Validate each contact section

Waiting to validate data until all sections have been completed can be a cause of significant frustration and adds more time to the process while the consumer scrolls back and forth to identify errors.

If you don't validate contact information during the checkout process, you could be disrupting a positive customer experience. For example, if you use email to identify client accounts, warranties, and for call centre look ups but don't validate the email, you could create a situation where you have sent an email to confirm purchase and warranty information, but the customer hasn't received it and cannot be identified by their (correct) email address.

Tips

- Trigger validation immediately after the mailing address, phone number, or email address is entered (by immediately initiating a real-time API call to your validation solution server). This will likely be viewed as supportive by the consumer.
- When possible, flag accounts where a customer overrode any corrections suggested by the validation solution so that you can check them against error logs, or the returned mail and any address correction fees from your couriers.
- Recognise that a failing API request can block the page, and block checkout if not properly handled. As many API calls can happen during checkout, if errors or outages aren't handled correctly, all customers could be prevented from checking out. Your process should gracefully handle errors to allow checkout if the API service isn't mission critical (i.e. contact data validation).

#5 and #6 best practices focus on email data

Capturing consumers' email address accurately provides many potential benefits including the ability to remarket after abandonment, personalise follow-up offers, and reverse append additional contact or demographic data.

5. Collect the consumer's email address first

Basket abandonment often occurs due to simple distractions that occur during checkout. That's why it's important to capture consumers' email addresses up front, so that re-engagement is possible.

Abandoned basket emails appear to be remarkably successful resulting in high open rates (>45%) and representing over 25 percent of eCommerce revenues. Those sent within a short time of the abandonment have most impact.

Tips

- Ask for an email address before the other contact information so you have a way to reach out to the consumer if the basket is abandoned.

6. Use fast, real-time, email address validation

Your email validation solution should:

1. Check to ensure that the email address is well-formed and provides suggestions for obvious errors such as .net vs. .com or gmial vs. gmail
2. Check the domain to make sure it has an email server that's up and running
3. Ping the server in real-time to check that the inbox is actually receiving mail.

It's almost impossible to correct a bad email address after it has been submitted and accepted - minor changes to very well-known domain names excepted, e.g. yhoo.com to yahoo.com. Emailing to a valid, but incorrect address, can harm your brand perception or offer expensive and undeserved discounts to non-customers.

Tips

- Use email address validation solution response codes to determine possible causes of error (see appendix - #9 best practice) and provide guidance on how to correct them. For example, "Invalid email address: please check spelling."

#7 and #8 best practices focus on address data

Accurate address data capture allows you to ensure delivery of ordered packages and provide a seamless customer experience while maintaining a fast-paced checkout process with less friction and risk of abandonment.

7. Keep a natural order to your contact fields during the checkout process

As eCommerce continues to grow, we can expect international sales to grow too. A natural order of your contact fields means ensuring your fields fit the consumer or national custom applicable to your audience, while accommodating international contact detail capture.

Intuitive predictive search or auto-completion approaches are often more effective at reducing keystrokes and allow consumers to follow a familiar form flow pattern - address, town, postcode (in the UK), and by predicting and presenting only valid addresses, they help ensure accurate address capture. Smoothing the flow and avoiding friction speeds during the checkout process and reduces the instances of basket abandonment.

Tips

- Use predictive search to minimise keystrokes and guarantee accuracy. This will enable an easy, but trusted, navigation for your customers.
- Consider disabling browser-based autocomplete options unless it is clear they do not conflict with or overwrite the valid address suggestions. Browser-stored data is unlikely to have been verified and may be incomplete and contain errors.
- If you are including international shipping, make sure your contact fields fit the local mailing custom and language. More on this in the step #8.

8. Validate against official postal address sources

A key determinant in deliverability is whether an address is compliant with the official postal address formatting and recorded address data. In the UK, the default authority on address data is the Royal Mail. Addresses that do not conform to the Royal Mail's Postcode Address File (PAF) risk being "undeliverable as addressed".

Some address validation approaches only test if an address is "feasible." For example, that the street exists, and the house number falls within the range of addresses on that street.

So, for example, 161 Blackfriars Road, London, SE1 8EZ is a feasible address and is formatted correctly but it doesn't exist.

How can you tell? When an address is validated against an official postal address source, the validation method should return metadata or response codes indicating the status of the address. For example, for PAF the metadata might include Delivery Point Type indicator (is it a small user organisation, large user organisation or residential address) and Unique Delivery Point Reference Number (UDPRN), which is an 8 character code assigned to every Delivery Point in the Royal Mail's PAF. Although worth noting that a Delivery Point is not always unique to an address as sometimes a Delivery Point is shared, for example some flats will have one letterbox between them.

Couriers may also require additional information depending on the type of service. For example, phone number if there is a delivery problem. Without this additional information packages may be returned as undeliverable and associated fees charged. It is also worth considering the delivery experience as most UK consumers expect to receive delivery updates or tracking information. Therefore, capturing an accurate email address or mobile number for SMS updates is key to the end-to-end customer journey. This will also support deliverability because tracking often enables the recipient to update the delivery if they aren't going to be available to receive the package.

Tips

- Make sure that the address is formatted correctly and can receive mail.
- Consider utilising Royal Mail Multiple Residency alongside PAF to assist with identifying individual dwellings within multiple occupancy buildings that share a letterbox.
- Deliver to store: Deliver to a store logistics is the responsibility of the vendor or retailer - not the customer. However, ensure store addresses are valid and formatted in compliance with the chosen courier.
- International shipping: Recognise that international address validation will be different from domestic address validation. Languages, character sets, formats, address sequences, and response codes differ greatly from country to country and may require different validation approaches. International address correction fees are significantly higher and achieving returns may be impossible or very expensive. Make sure to understand the addressing requirements of your international couriers.

9. Be descriptive with error messages

Leverage response codes provided by your contact data validation software to ensure error messages give your consumer guidance on the reason why a field entry may be considered invalid. Although you may need to adapt the response codes to be understood by the customer, this will provide a better user experience.

The consumer wants to complete their purchase as soon as possible. If there is a generic notification like “invalid entry” and no indication of what’s wrong with the original entry, there’s a chance your customer could get frustrated, leaving them to abandon their intended purchase and hurt your brand reputation.

A detailed list of possible error messages is listed in the appendix together with suggestions on how to use them.

Tips

- Ensure your notifications informing a customer of an invalid entry are specific.
- Leverage returned information like Delivery Point Type.
- Recognise that poorly handled outages and errors can cause full checkout outages, and even that poor messaging or workflows can cause basket abandonment through confusing workflows or even infinite validation loops when implemented incorrectly.

10. Guide customers with prompts

When validating contact information, it is important to guide your customer through the validation process and always give them the option to opt out of any recommended changes. However, customers should feel encouraged to accept the changes by default and opt out only if they firmly disagree.

Here’s an example: Consumers may prefer to enter their address in a way that is unrecognisable by the courier or postal service - for example, the customer could write “The Castle on Battle Hill” versus “53 Battle Hill Road.” In this case, the courier will simply return the mail or package if the address is not compatible with their formats and records, likely resulting in address correction fees for you. Often only small changes are required to ensure mailing addresses comply with courier standards. For example, correctly formatting postcodes or removing unwanted preceding text such as “Store 4263” or “Leave at door” that does not form part of the official address and should be stored elsewhere in an appropriate field.

By guiding your customer through prompts and options to opt out, you can validate the data while still delivering a seamless customer experience.

Tips

- Allow visitors to bypass or ‘x-out’ of suggested corrections but prompt them to confirm their input and remind them that errors may cause problems. For example, “This address appears undeliverable. Are you sure you want to proceed?”
- Always place bypass text or buttons away from the contact data capture fields. Using bold or colourful bypass buttons can encourage purchasers in a hurry to confirm their invalid input.

11. Verify contact data before accepting each order - even for returning customers

While we recommend that guest checkout should be the default, it’s likely that most of your customers will be repeat visitors, purchasers, or members whose data was captured on a previous visit. Therefore, there’s no need for them to re-enter their contact data and they can speed through the checkout process. However, before the purchase is complete, make sure you confirm their delivery details.



Don't assume that the contact information in your records is accurate, even if they are a returning customer.

According to ONS, on average 11% of the UK's population move every year, that equates to approximately 25,000 address changes a day, and it's possible they may have not remembered to update their information on your site. Similarly, many will have gotten new phones and may have changed their number. This goes for email, as well.

It's also possible that the information collected on an earlier visit was entered incorrectly and any suggested corrections ignored. If their credit card has expired, you won't accept their order without updating their payment details. Treat contact data the same way.

Your existing customers are your most important asset. Take the time to confirm or validate their contact data before you make each delivery. It's the best way to ensure customer satisfaction and to avoid costly mistakes.

Tips

- Before they submit any new purchase make sure to confirm or validate their existing contact data, especially their address. This can be done by asking them to confirm their details and by running the validation checks if they enter new contact details, pointing out any issues so they can be corrected immediately.
- Consider a periodic database cleanse to identify changed or erroneous data. Remember up to 2% of data can go out of date per month ([HubSpot](#)).

Ecommerce has become a key growth engine for retail over the past few years, a trend that has been further emphasised during the pandemic. Yet despite its growth potential it is challenging to do successfully and profitably. By carefully designing their checkout processes, eCommerce vendors can benefit from the growth without incurring the sometimes-significant costs associated with basket abandonment and courier address correction fees.

Appendix

#9 Best practice: Be descriptive with error messages, leverage returned information - continued

Address validation solution result codes include:

PAF Delivery Point Type:

Distinguishes between small user organisations or residential delivery points, and large user organisations.

Example contact form response: Note: This is listed as a business address and may not receive weekend mail.

Email address validation solution result codes include:

- Mailbox exists and is reachable.
- Mailbox exists but is disabled.
- Mailbox does not exist.
- Mailbox is full.
- Mailbox belongs to a role account, such as support@, sales@, info@.
- Mailbox is likely a spam trap, black hole, or a seed.
- Mailbox or domain name contains profanity (Optional).
- Domain does not respond to validation requests or does not have any active servers.
- Domain name is likely a typo (e.g., gmial vs. gmail).
- Domain is administered by a disposable email provider (e.g., 10MinuteMail), which could indicate fraud risk.
- Unknown: unable to conclusively verify or invalidate the address. This may be because the domain is an accept-all (most business domains), the request timed out due to the host domain not responding in time, or the response was indeterminate.

Example contact form responses: This email address appears to be invalid, please provide an alternative. Please check that your domain name is correct.

Phone number validation solution codes include a level of certainty result code:

Result Code	Certainty	Comment
0	Unverified	Invalid number format supplied
1	Unknown	Valid number format but not verified with network lookup
2	Absent	Number format valid and number verified via network lookup but not currently available (i.e. phone off, out of range)
3	Verified	Number format valid and number verified
4	Teleservice not provisioned	Valid number but not active on a network

Example contact form response: Please check this number it appears to be inactive.



¹Statista. (2020, December 10). Shopping basket abandonment rate worldwide 2020, by industry. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/457078/category-basket-abandonment-rate-worldwide/>

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