Partners in Magento Hosting, Extensions & Coding

Companies we Love | Apr 22, 2015 | 0 | 1072

Not a day goes by that we don't get asked about our ecommerce platform, our host and the extensions that we're using to make our store hum! It's been a long journey and we've wasted thousands of dollars on crappy hosting and worthless extensions over the years but we've finally arrived at a happy, stable place! Please note that this is not a comprehensive comparison of all the hosts and modules that exist, but rather a list of the companies that we've come to use and trust to continue improving their services along this Magento journey. I write this as Magento Imagine 2015 takes place in Las Vegas and the community learns more about the Magento 2.0 release. Without further ado, here's what we have under the hood of our Magento Installation.

Hosting

We have been through 4 Magento hosts and finally landed a good partner with Nexcess. We started with one of their shared SIP plans and gradually made our way up to a dedicated SIP 400 server. It's definitely not the cheapest option out there but our site's up-time and their responsiveness to our issues, has made it worth the price-tag! I highly recommend them to anyone looking for a new host.

Development

As with our hosting, we've gone through half a dozen development firms and independent contractors. From new site deployments to building extensions and themes, we've run the gambit in quality of service received. In the early days we had guys working on our site and changing core code....and lying to us about it. We've even had developers disappear into thin air, never to be heard of again. We've been happy with UP and Running Software for the past several years. Although they do not focus specifically on Magento, we've been fortunate enough to work closely with one of their developers who knows our site like the back of her hand! She has been instrumental in allowing us to deploy fixes, updates and improvements. Finding a good developer is probably the biggest decision that you'll make, so choose wisely!

Modules

We currently have too many modules, plus one, installed on our system(s) We'll be looking to decrease the overall number of modules that we have installed once we move over to Magento 2.0, but for now, we need every single one of them listed below. Most of our critical functions are handled by these third party modules. We've learned the hard way , that you must choose a reputable company or else the module will most likely cause conflicts and most definitely will not be maintained over time. Now that the ecosystem has matured, I recommend working with only handful of companies because each of them offer so many great modules. Listed below are the extensions that we use (in no particular order).

- Unirgy DropShip
  - We are a drop-shipper and this module was a godsend when Boris released it. It is at the core of what we do everyday and we've heavily customized it over time. Boris is actually working on his own open-source ecommerce platform. We wish him the best and I highly recommend this module for any drop-shippers out there.
- Aheadworks Extensions
  - We've been using their modules for years and keep buying more. They have pretty much everything that you'll ever need. We appreciate that the modules are open source and we've heavily modded a few of them. Here are the modules that we currently have installed:
  - Ajax Cart Pro
  - Follow UP Email
  - Frequently Bought Together
  - Knowledge Base
  - Product Questions
  - Advanced Reports
  - Help Desk Ultimate
- M2E Pro – Amazon & Ebay
  - We use their module to list our products on Ebay and Amazon. The module is extremely thorough (although it could use a few UI updates!) It truly is though, amazing the level of integration that they have established. Once you learn the intricacies of the system, it's simply set-it and forget-it! Highly recommended.
- Appzrain Subcategories Grid List
  - I'm not sure why this isn't build into Magento but this free module lets you display subcategories on your category pages. With a little styling it can work for anyone's site.
- Newsbits Form Creator
  - Awesome little extension that lets you create forms on any page of your website. We've under-utilized this so far but the opportunities are endless.
- Orange33 Color Picker
  - Simple module that works with configurable products, allowing customers to select from actual color options. Works great for us.
- Direct2shop Fraud Detection
  - This fraud detection module has saved us thousands of dollars! Although we already have some basic fraud prevention procedures in place, this module adds a fraud score to the order grid. It's one more data point when determining if an order is fraud or not.
- Magewarx Extensions
  - They make some great modules with features that should have been included in Magento to start with. Their SEO suite is a must own for anyone. Over the past 5 years we had hacked together most of the features in that module. It cost us thousands of dollars in development fees and it was a spidery mess. The SEO suite does everything that we built, but all in one module.
  - SEO Suite
  - Shopping List
  - Sitemap Suite
- Anowave Customer Price configuration
  - This is a solution if you need to change different groups of customers (or individual ones) different rates. We're working on signing some exclusive contracts with partners and we'll need to offer them discounted pricing. We have purchased and installed on our dev-site but we have not fully tested it out yet.
- Ultimo Theme
  - We just recently purchased this and styled it for the launch of our new site. Great responsive design and lots of controls from the admin panel. We love it.
- Templates Master Extensions
  - We've installed one of their modules (rich snippets) but have since remove it. The one thing this company needs to change is the in-magento marketing they do. They push messages to your store at a 10x frequency of anyone else.
- GoMage Feed Pro
  - This was the original feed program that we installed years ago. We've since stopped using this module in favor of the Wyomind Feed Module (see below).
- BestMage Extensions
  - We needed a solution for how to display one of our whiteboards that had many different configurable options. The standard drop-down Magento option didn't accomplish what we wanted. These 3 modules together proved to be quite powerful. We've since modded one of the modules to allow a bit more flexibility.
  - Easy Configurable Product Matrix Frontend
  - Configurable Products Matrix Backend
  - Configurable Products Simple Prices
- Tentura Disqus Comments
  - We needed to get Disqus comments throughout our site so we turned to their module. It does all the basic things that you'll need. We customized a few things as well. Now it works great and we have comments on every single page.
- FME Product Attachments
  - This module lets you attach documents to product and CMS pages. We had tried 2 other ones previously, FME gave us the ability to attach the same doc to multiple products or pages so we've stuck with them without issues.
- Manadev Layered Navigation
  - We installed the module early on because we wanted direct urls for our shop-by pages. We've since hacked together some other pieces that allow us to display blocks above and below the standard content on the shop-by landing page. We use it for brand specific product categories like Dahle Paper Cutters. We also found a way to update the page name and meta information for any given landing page to optimize for search engines. All of these things combined is an seo powerhouse.
- Cart2Quote
  - We needed the ability for our customers to request quotes from our site and easily "accept" the offer and complete the checkout process on their own. At the time that we bought this module, they were only the game around (I'm not sure about now). We did try two other quote modules that were horrendous and made us jump for joy when we found cart2quote. In the early days it was missing 50% of the features we needed (you can see my feature requests littered throughout their help portal over the past several years).We ended up purchasing the open-source version and manually creating all of the features we needed. Luckily for everyone else, they've added virtually all of these features to their latest versions! We'll eventually get around to dumping our modifications and use their latest canonical version.
- Extendware Modules
  - These guys offer the best in class Full Page Cache Module. They update their modules constantly and their customer service response time is amazing. They've logged into our site half a dozen times over the past few years to troubleshoot for us. We all know that Magento EE has full page cache built it, but I can't imagine our site without the Extendware Full Page Cache module. The only drawback is that they are not open source. There are lots of little tweaks that we'd like to make to the module but we simply can't because they don't offer an open-source version. Maybe they'll come out with one soon?
  - Image Optimization
  - Backend Cache
  - Cache Warmer
  - Full Page Cache
  - Minify CSS, JS, HTML
- Mirasvit Sphinx Search
  - As we all know, default Magento search sucks. This module allowed us to speed up search and have a lot more control over the results. Sadly we haven't spent as much time as we should, tweaking things, but we love that it can search more than just our product catalog. Hopefully in 2015 we'll nail our search game.
- Yotpo Reviews Module
  - This modules lets us utilize Yotpo to collect reviews for us and overrides the default Magento review mechanism. We use them because they are the most reasonably priced out there, that provides a full set of features like social sharing and commenting on reviews. Many of the big players in the space charge multiple hundreds if not thousands of dollars per month depending on your order volume.
- Ebizmarts MailChimp & Mandrill Free Integration
  - This module has come a long way over the past few years. We had to make a bunch of customizations when we first installed it but we removed the customizations as the features got built into the module. Don't get sucked into paying hundreds of dollars a month for Mail Chimp integration...just use this module!
- Zendesk Integration
  - We use Zendesk for all of our customer service needs. This integration was pretty basic and got the job done. We had one special need which their developer made for us! We had a meeting with four or five people at Zendesk and they made sure the feature got built.
- Wyomind Modules
  - I really love the power of their modules. The UI took a minute to get used to, but once I did, they provide so much more power than the other feed modules out there. We were able to create custom variables and custom feeds for everything that we need. This is now an integral part of our everyday business.
  - Orders Export Tool
  - Data Feed Manager
- AOE Scheduler
  - It's how we can see all our cron Jobs. Fabrizio does some cool stuff with Magento and I love that he makes free stuff!
- Iceberg Commerce Video Gallery
  - We use this to display videos underneath the product image on the main product page. They were great at making updates for us when we wanted new features; fixes and updates came fast! We also use some of their widgets which are great. We have the single product embed and the product list embed widget.
- MagneticOne Store Manager
  - This program allows us to make updates directly to the Magento database (sounds scary right). When we're doing massive updates to products, we'll export them in MagOne, modify the data in Excel and then upload them. It's saved us a lot of time over the years.

Leave any comments below and I'd be happy to answer any questions that you might have.

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