Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, many aspects of retail and life have changed in the United States. The trajectory of consumer reliance and engagement with all things digital hasn't changed, but due to shelter-in-place orders, general fear of visiting too many stores and increased demand for durable goods due to the sudden increase in frequency of use of appliances, electronics and home furnishings, this reliance and engagement has accelerated.

Over the course of just a few months, consumers moved forward in their digital behavior in a way that would likely have taken a year or two had there been no pandemic. Add to that a desire by most consumers to do more research online before visiting the store where their likelihood of purchase success is highest, and your website is more important than ever to your success.

The following questions are designed to help ensure that your website is as effective as possible in driving consumers to your business. We've also included a general idea of the answers you're looking for. If your provider can't give you the answers and service you need, then don't hesitate to reach out to your Member Support Manager. We'll help you find the right provider and will work hard to make the transition to a better, more powerful site easy!

1. Does your website gather shopper intel to help you sell more? A powerful website can help you get to know your shoppers and what they're looking for. Plus, gathering information about the shoppers on your site will allow you to reach them in personalized, unique manners that often help turn shoppers into buyers.

What are you looking for?
☐ Your website should have technology integrated that asks customers to share information with you about themselves so that you know who they are.
☐ Your website should be tracking every action your shoppers take while visiting the site.
☐ Your website should alert your team when you have a hot prospect.
☐ Your website should be able to send abandoned cart and targeting promotional emails to known consumers to keep your store top of mind.

2. What capabilities do you have to automate pricing on the website? In the appliance, furniture, electronics and bedding industries, pricing changes quickly. A robust pricing automation program, built into your website, allows for more accurate pricing and does so with minimal time and effort by the retailer. MAPS, PMAPS, rebates and the like, along with their fast and efficient deployment when changes happen, can often be the difference in attracting the attention of a consumer or adversely attracting the attention of a manufacturing partner.

What are you looking for?
☐ The ability to have the website execute changes to MAP and PMAP in real time, with no action needed from the retailer.
☐ The ability to create custom pricing rules, such as adjustments based on competitor pricing, with defined parameters that are executed with no action needed from the retailer.
☐ The ability to import prices and/or your cost so you don't need to enter all values individually.

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☐ The ability to seamlessly integrate with your digital price tag program, which ensures that pricing in your store and on your site are always updated in real time and executed with no action needed by the retailer.

3. What transactional abilities do you have on your website? Consumer behavior over the past few months has accelerated with regards to purchase path, with some consumers, especially those at high risk for COVID-19, desiring to complete their purchase from your website with no in-store visit.

What are you looking for?
☐ The ability to validate an address, offer delivery or pickup options, and accept payment, which are all necessary for a website to truly be transactional.
☐ A fully functional cart, which can advise the shopper on inventory availability, offer any applicable product protection plans, suggest needed accessories, etc.

4. What infrastructure is in place to allow you to merchandise the website as you would a store? A robust product catalog is important. But just as you can't possibly display or stock every product from every manufacturer, your website must be well merchandised to be effective. The ability to automate inventory feeds, designate on-display products and highlight your go-to lines, products and packages is important.

What are you looking for?
☐ Consumers want to know what's in stock and what needs to be ordered. The ability to connect an inventory feed that will not only track merchandise that you have on hand but will also allow you to designate which items are on display (and at which location, if you operate multiple stores) will greatly enrich the shopping experience.
☐ The ability to control the order in which items appear to shoppers can help you create a superior shopping experience while showcasing your most important items first.
☐ Pricing across the industry changes very quickly. The integration of rebates is critical and should be automated, requiring no action by the retailer to remain up to date.

5. How does the website integrate with digital marketing efforts? A best-in-class website is certainly of paramount importance, but winning takes more than just that. Additionally, you'll need the power of digital marketing to draw potential customers to your website, allowing you to then convert those shoppers into customers. In order to be optimally effective, your website must be fully integrated with your digital marketing plan and campaigns.

What are you looking for?
☐ Your website should have consistent and keyword-friendly URLs that make it possible for your digital marketing agency to direct customers to pages that match up with what they searched. For example, a customer searching for "where to buy professional gas ranges" should be connected to your pro gas range page and not your home page.
☐ Your website should have the ability to create custom landing pages around promotions and sales that you are advertising. If you are advertising a 4th of July promotion, then the customer should be linked directly to this sale from your ad. The page should include information about the promotion and have the ability to shop products advertised as part of this promotion. This creates a cohesive strategy between your website and your marketing efforts. It also ensures that customers are quickly directed to the pages that have the information they were looking for so that once on the site they don't have to try and find the information. This is important to increase conversions and decrease your cost per click. Your budget will go further and your return on ad spend will be higher.

6. What is the quality and quantity of your product data? Much as a store – no matter how well located, appointed and staffed – would experience little success without the right products to offer, your website can only be effective and appealing if it's stocked with the right products and those products are presented professionally. Product data is a huge investment, and it's very challenging to create and maintain.

What are you looking for?

☐ A product catalog that is normalized. By definition, normalization of a product catalog is creating consistent and uniform features, attributes and specifications for all products on a website. The result is an easy-to-navigate and cohesive catalog that greatly enhances the experience of shoppers on your website. Customers can quickly and easily find information for all products.

☐ A robust product catalog. Your company likely merchandises products from many different manufacturers. Each of these manufacturers likely offers thousands of products that you'll want to include in your catalog, and this is only possible if your provider has a broad product catalog. Successful durable goods websites are hosted by providers who have more than 2,000,000 products cataloged. The only option you'll likely have with a provider who deploys a limited catalog is to create your own product data for the brands you carry, which can be time-consuming and expensive.