shopify

Shopify or Not?

The Ultimate Guide to Unlocking
SEO Potential

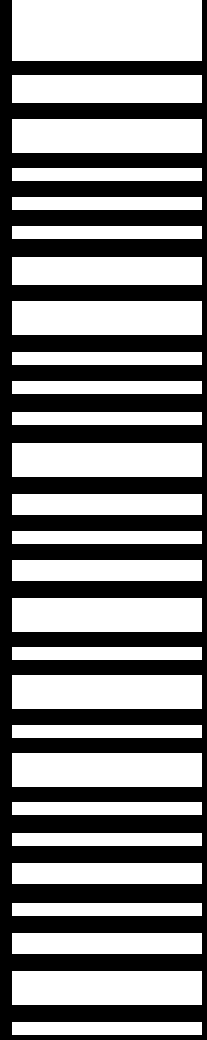**Quickfire** Digital | honchō®

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Prologue

Executive Summary

Shopify adoption has gone through the roof in recent months. But, for one reason or another, the platform seems to have failed to win the hearts and minds of the SEO community. We have been watching the trends carefully and felt the need to bring the problems and practical solutions together in one place. To achieve this, we have partnered with Quickfire Digital, a web development agency that specialises in the development of Shopify sites.

Our aim is to show the potential SEO hurdles you might face while using Shopify, yes, but we also share possible steps you can take to circumvent these issues. This is the first time (in our knowledge) that an SEO agency has partnered with a Shopify specialist agency in an attempt to bridge the gap between SEO recommendations and the technical implementation of those recommendations.

In this report, we have not only touched upon the sensitive SEO topics that have sparked fierce industry debate, but we have also provided insight on how Shopify can impact the Paid Media activity of a website, for a more holistic view.

This paper casts a wide net over a range of topics, from picking the right Shopify theme to which third party apps you should be using to maximise functionality. Additionally, we look to the future, investigating the most interesting upcoming Shopify features which will likely influence SEO and ecommerce setup in general.

Who is this Report For?

Although this report was written to discern whether Shopify is a viable option for a successful e-commerce site in general, it also serves to advise and inform those who may be considering using Shopify as their chosen business platform. This white paper is useful for a wide range of audiences including, but not limited to, digital managers, ecommerce business owners, the wider SEO community, developers and Paid Media specialists.

The Emergence of Shopify

Why is Shopify so Popular?

Shopify can be seen as a complete e-commerce platform. One of its main strengths is the low barrier to entry and the ease of set-up, allowing anyone to own an online store and sell products on multiple channels - Search, Google Ads, Facebook and physical sales.

Self-hosted
Shopify is a self-hosted platform, which means it comes with a whole host of options for themes, extensions and cart management. Since you don't have to develop everything from scratch, the development cost is much more manageable compared to hosted platforms.

It's affordable
Cost is an important factor for almost everyone looking to build an e-commerce website, as typically a business would budget hundreds or thousands a month to meet their own needs. Shopify helps by providing everything a site needs to get up and running included in one monthly price.

Well-designed themes
The default Shopify themes are very good looking, fitting in with the current sleek and minimalist designs seen on the biggest and most popular retailer sites. There are also simple and convenient options in terms of upgrading to a paid theme for a one-off cost.

Ease of payments
Shopify comes with inbuilt payment services like PayPal, Amazon Pay or Apple Pay. A store will also be able to accept direct payments via credit cards using Shopify Payment, which makes the shopping process smoother for customers.

Sell both digital and physical products
Shopify allows users to handle both digital and physical products. They offer a free app that can be used to specify product types to limit confusion.

Marketing Automation
There is some marketing automation for store owners to implement. Out-of-the-box Shopify has some basic automation features in the form of cart abandonment, designed to help shop owners follow up with visitors who didn't complete the checkout process.

Google Shopping
Google has an official app for Shopify which allows shop owners to hook their inventory straight up to Google Shopping, guiding users through the set-up of Merchant centre and their accounts. Other than the feed verification, this is an incredibly easy and streamlined process.

Who is Using Shopify?

Shopify is used by all types of people and businesses, from small, independent shops to tech startups to global, multi-million dollar brands. Shopify and Shopify Plus are attracting many e-commerce big-hitters, and more and more brands are migrating to the platform to sell online. Some of the most popular that we've seen are:

Is Shopify Growing?
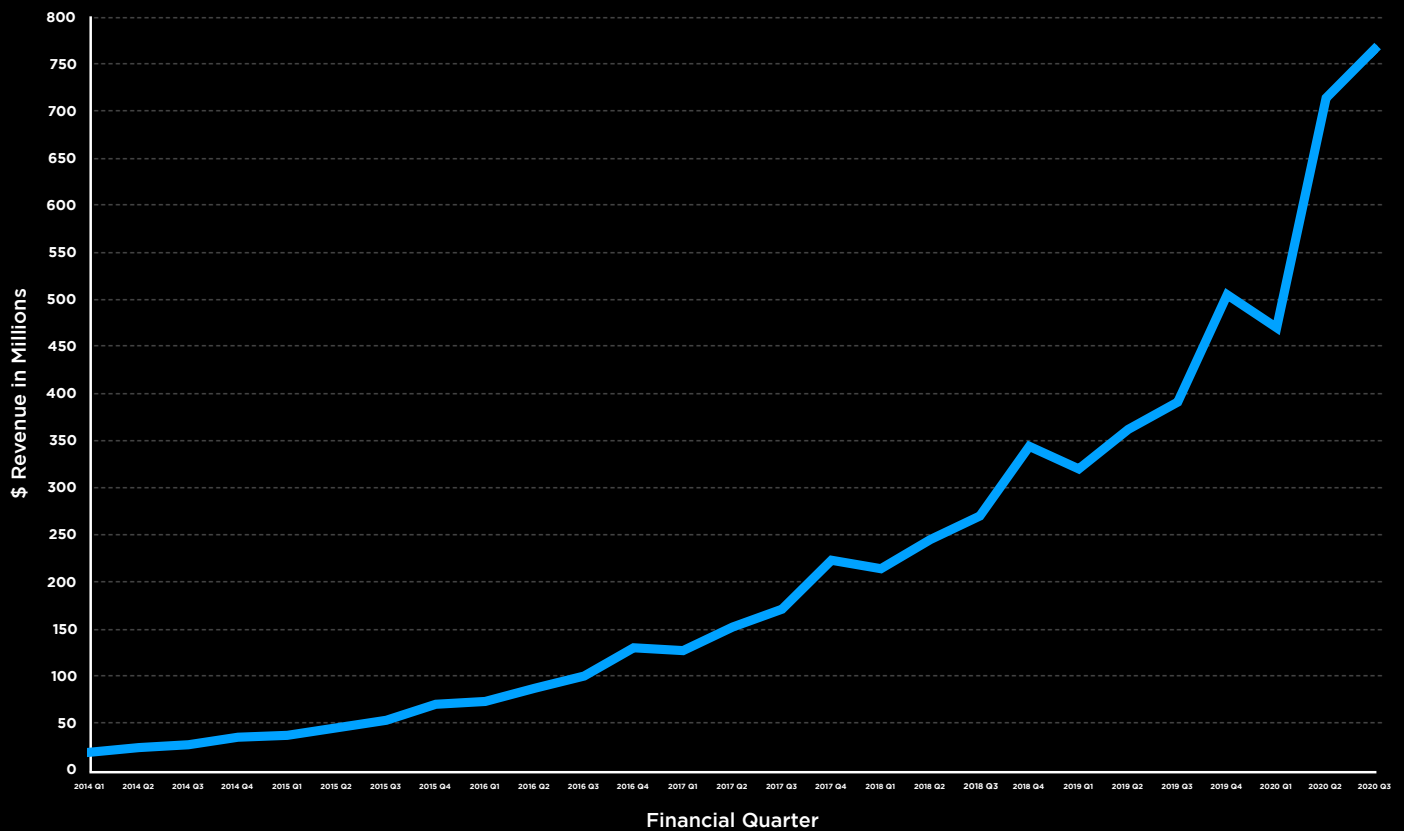
Over the past seven years Shopify has seen consistent growth, with a huge increase in popularity in 2017 and 2018. It's clear from the relatively quick pickup that people are flooding to the platform for their website building needs.

With the constant increase in the number of online shoppers, fuelled in part by the COVID-19 pandemic, the popularity of Shopify could only continue to grow as more brands take their businesses online.

Analysing the
Shopify Platform

How is Shopify Different From Other e-commerce Platforms?

One of the biggest benefits of Shopify is that it is a managed system, meaning all those back-end headaches are taken away from the merchant. This makes it more scalable than many other platforms, being able to handle traffic increases seamlessly.

Shopify itself deals with security and updates, allowing merchants to concentrate on running their stores and not worrying about managing the technical requirements of their website.

Think of it like this: if your business operates from a serviced office, you don't need to worry about electricity, running water, etc., as it's all taken care of for you. That's Shopify.

The majority of other e-commerce platforms put the onus on you to keep on top of security and general updates. This rigid set-up increases the reliability of your e-commerce platform, but it does mean that flexibility is reduced.

Development and SEO

Is Shopify suitable for SEO?

We've analysed six different sites to establish whether there is any correlation between the platform and the performance in SERPs. We've faced the challenge of looking at a domain and determining whether the lack of visibility or opportunity is caused by inherent platform issues or by optimisation effort.

> " *So, is Shopify suitable for SEO? In a word, yes. But there are certain things to consider when considering using Shopify for your business* "

Are brands visible using Shopify?

Reviewing the search and onsite performance of our six chosen sites, we've been able to determine whether it's possible to build a Shopify website that has good visibility in SERPs. Our findings are in favour of Shopify, with fashion powerhouses Steve Madden and Gymshark having an especially firm hold on their branded terms as well as generic searches, both in the UK and US.

Domain/Website	Ranking Keywords	Est. Traffic
https://www.stevemadden.com/	247,000	803,000
https://www.gymshark.com/	119,000	638,000
https://www.sweat.com/	91,600	59,000
https://turtlebeach.com/	88,000	31,200
https://www.mvmtwatches.com/	50,800	263,000
https://secretlab.co.uk/	2,400	5,500

Data from ahrefs August 2020

SEO Considerations for Shopify

Duplicate content and Crawl Bloat

Duplication is one of the most critical errors from an SEO perspective. Sites that suffer from any form of duplicate or near-duplicate content will see reduced visibility within search, as Google may struggle to determine which page or pages to serve in search results.

Crawl bloat, on the other hand, can be a result of keeping duplicate content but resolving duplication through canonical, noindex or other robots directives. This happens when a page is kept live to preserve a user journey - so it is still being crawled by Google, but isn't then returned in results. This means Google is still using the resource to discover and understand these pages, but doing nothing with the information. Ultimately, Google will take longer to get a full grasp of what is happening on the site.

Product Pages

Shopify creates this issue within their product pages. By default, Shopify stores allow their /products/ pages to render at multiple URL paths. For example, on stevemadden.com you can access the same product through the collection as well as the root domain:

https://www.stevemadden.com/products/gills-black-suede
https://www.stevemadden.com/collections/womens-sneakers/products/gills-black-suede

Shopify accounts for this by ensuring that all /collections/.*/products/ pages include a canonical tag back to the associated /products/ page, which does tackle the duplication error, however the crawling and associated wastage still remain.

Internal linking & site hierarchy

While the canonical tags added to a site help with the duplication, it also causes a more pressing issue. As the /product/ URLs aren't linked as widely as the /collections/ URLs, a site is created around non-canonical URLs. This means Google is shown non-indexable pages more often than the pages you want to be indexed, as they don't naturally sit in the hierarchy or navigation.

It is worth remembering that canonicals are used as a hint by Google and not a hard rule. Essentially, we're relying on Google to make a judgement about whether or not the content is duplicate each time that it crawls these pages.

Product variant pages

Similar to duplication caused by the creation of new collection pages, another issue comes from product variants. It's not uncommon to see Shopify stores in which multiple product URLs are created for the same product, with only slight variations. This can create duplicate content issues, as often the core product is the same, but only a single attribute - such as colour - changes.

For example:
https://www.stevemadden.com/products/gills-white-leather
https://www.stevemadden.com/products/gills-beige-snake

While technically not always an SEO limitation, knowing how to handle this is crucial to ensure a site is not working against itself. Shopify is able to host product variants on a single URL or on multiple, so it is worth deciding early on how you're going to tackle product variants if your site uses them.

Using a Single URL	Ranking Keywords
No threat of duplication	All content needs to be unique to the product variant
Potentially large keyword scope to target	Can be highly targeted to specific terms
Efficient for crawling	Potential to create 1,000s of more URLs for search engines to crawl and understand

Dealing with duplicate content from a development perspective

We're aware that Shopify creates duplication and crawl bloat in the following ways:

1. Product pages
2. Pagination for collection pages

When duplicate content issues are caused by products in collections, they can usually be managed through the use of canonicals. This will often be carried out by a combination of an SEO agency and a development team.

To begin with, you'll need to gain access to your theme's liquid files. Shopify guides you through the process here.

You'll then need to search for this: {{ product.url | within: collection }} and replace with {{ product.url }}. In theory, this should mean that all canonical product URLs are visible in any collections page.

Internal links should then be pointed to the product version of the URL and the collection versions should be discounted from your XML sitemap. It is also important that the collection URLs remain indexed. Adding a noindex marker will not only confuse search engines but also end up with all versions of the URL being noindexed. After carrying this work out, you might see some fluctuation in rankings until search engines understand what has been applied so be prepared.

Crawling & Indexing

Robots.txt
A very important note is that with Shopify stores, you cannot adjust the robots.txt file. While you can add the "noindex" to pages through the theme.liquid, this is not as helpful if you want to prevent Google from crawling your content altogether.

By default, Shopify will disallow crawling in:

- Admin area
- Checkout
- Orders
- Shopping cart
- Internal search
- Policies page

While it's nice that Shopify creates some default disallow commands, the fact that the robots.txt file cannot be adjusted can be very limiting. The robots.txt is probably the easiest way to control Google's crawl of a site, as it's extremely easy to update and allows for a lot of flexibility.

Luuk_Harleman New Member 💬3 ☑0 👍5	06-08-2018 01:12 PM	···
	2018 and still not possible to edit robot and/or sitemaps? Unbelievable	
	Crisp Golf	
jacktyler3 New Member 💬6 ☑0 👍0	06-16-2019 04:35 PM	···
	Hi @Don,	
	I have Google crawling some old pages that are no longer supposed to exist, and still indexing them. How can I tell google not to crawl them if I can't edit the robots.txt file? They are already not submitted in the sitemap...	

Source: Shopify Community Forum

How to approach robots.txt from a development perspective

To prevent a page from being crawled, you'll need to head back into your theme liquid files and, in the <head> section, add the following:

{% if handle contains 'page-handle-you-want-to-exclude' %}
<meta name="robots" content="noindex">
{% endif %}

Shopify lays out the full instructions here.

An alternative to the above is to use Cloudfare configurations and a piece of free software called Sloth.

First up, you will need a Cloudflare account. Plans range from free to custom enterprise. Secondly, you need to change your website's nameservers to Cloudflare's.

Next, you'll need to create a Cloudfare Workers account and install the Workers CLI - you can follow the instructions here.

Once done, within Sloth, select the robots.txt option, add your contents into the text field and save. This override can be toggled on and off easily as and when it is required.

Sloth can also be used for other SEO issues such as redirects and Hreflang projects.

Log Files

Similar to the robots.txt, it is important to note that Shopify does not provide you with log file information. This is not ideal when trying to uncover that extra layer of insight, or similarly during a migration process when log files may be needed to understand how Google is interacting with a website.

While these cannot be accessed directly, changing the URL to "/admin/activity" in your Shopify admin should help. Apps are available to export the information, such as Excelxcelify, while the Logify app is also an option to gain access to shop and staff activity.

Redirects

Shopify does allow you to implement redirects out-of-the-box, which is great. You can use this for consolidating old or expired pages, or any other content that no longer exists. You can do this by going to Online Store > Navigation > URL Redirects.

However, this means there is no bulk redirect tool, so all URLs need to be done on a "one by one" basis.

Structured Data

The inclusion of structured data within Shopify is reliant on the theme you choose. Most of the Shopify themes will contain "Product" markup that provides Google with key information such as your product's name, description, price, etc. However, it is worth checking what a theme includes before you commit, as you may need additional development resource to configure Structured data that fits your site.

While product schema is debatably the most important, we'd also recommend including the following:

- Organisation
- Article
- Bread crumb
- Site Search

Sitemaps

XML Sitemaps - All Shopify stores automatically generate a sitemap.xml file that contains links to all your products, product images, pages, collections, and blog posts.

However, for some more advanced SEO use cases, this can be limiting. This is because these sitemaps cannot be manually altered and new sitemaps cannot easily be created on the CMS (and subsequently uploaded to Search Console).

HTML Sitemaps - Typically, we don't see Shopify Themes including an HTML sitemap, but you can create HTML sitemaps by creating a theme template within your theme - although this means you will probably need development resources.

While there is debate around the usefulness and benefit of an HTML sitemap, we'd always encourage retailers to create them, if only to provide a clear structure for users who might be looking for a specific category, product or brand.

Sitemap workarounds

Because the automatically-created XML sitemap cannot be edited within Shopify, to make changes here you will need to create a custom one in a tool such as Screaming Frog.

If you go down this route, it is important to add any canonicalisation or noindex rules within your chosen third-party tool.

The next steps are to upload this as a file to Shopify and then create a redirect from a new XML URL that 404s as you can't redirect from a live URL. Then, submit your sitemap to Google Search Console. This isn't a perfect solution, and it comes with its own issues. You will have to consistently manage your sitemap by mirroring site changes within your custom sitemap. This can become quite time-consuming if pages are frequently going in and out, so you'll need to consider the drawbacks carefully before going down this route.

Website Performance

Apps

Similar to WordPress plugins, Shopify offers "Apps" that allow you to add advanced functionality to your site, without having to manually edit the code. Most of the Shopify Apps you'll find are paid, and will require either a one-time or monthly fee.

Much like any kind of "bolt-on" for any CMS, the overuse of apps can cause performance issues. We'd always suggest working with developers who are comfortable with the Shopify platform, as the solution will be bespoke to your needs and site.

Site Speed

Shopify is not a slow platform. But, like with any site, the more functionality added, the more your site has to do, so the platform may suffer from site speed or performance issues.

Utilising AMP pages within your site could help with speed issues. In Shopify, you can generate AMP pages for your site quickly and efficiently with FireAMP or RocketAmp Apps. Both these Apps have an over-four-star rating on the Shopify App Store, and improve your page loading time on mobile. Otherwise, you could consider creating the Shopify API to develop these AMP pages.

Things to Consider When Migrating From Another Platform

When migrating, the biggest area by far is data, which can be a complicated issue when migrating to Shopify from another platform. It's not impossible to manage a migration yourself, but you would be best served to use a company experienced in migrating data to Shopify.

From a customer perspective, you'll need to factor in a fresh wave of onboarding. Account passwords can't be copied over, so customer accounts will need to be reactivated.

You'll also need to select a theme which suits your business and demands, and be prepared for functionality changes. What you gain in terms of reliability and scalability with Shopify you might lose in terms of flexibility, so be ready to not get like-for-like features.

You'll also need to cover off all of your back-end systems integrations and be confident that your chosen theme can deal with other business systems. Again, a development company can assist with this.

Development Pros and Cons

Pros

You're limited to what you can do. Although that might sound like a negative, it actually means that developers can't go over-the-top and create a site which begins to become very difficult to manage.

It also means that should you have more than one developer working on your site, you shouldn't fall victim to developers coding things in their own personal ways - creating possible issues for further development work.

Because of the platform's rigidity, it also means developers are going to find it nearly impossible to break your site - something a trustworthy developer is always fearful of.

It won't be a steep learning curve for someone with coding experience, so a developer who is new to Shopify shouldn't have a problem figuring things out. In fact, it would even be possible for someone with no experience to get to grips with the basic dev elements, meaning it's a good option for a first website.

In terms of design, there are no real limitations so anything is, theoretically, possible.

One key benefit not related directly to development is scalability. Because Shopify is internally-hosted, you should never need to worry about growth and spikes in traffic.

Cons

You're limited to what you can do. It's a positive because you'll struggle to break a site, but it can also be frustrating for a developer who is used to writing good code for good reasons.

For security, Shopify severely limits the access you have to the server code and therefore the developer's ability to change it. This leaves developers with three options:

Rely on third-party apps. However, these are often hosted by the team responsible for developing them, so you end up reliant on them. If their hosting goes down, so does your site. Having too many apps interacting with each other can also cause conflicts. Decent apps aren't free either, and could increase your monthly cost quickly.

Find ingenious ways around the limitations of the server system, which is essentially what the third-party apps do but you can host it yourself in your Shopify account. This solves the hosting issue but can make things slow and incompatible with certain other apps that rely on things happening in certain ways.

Use Javascript (front end code) to manipulate and change the page after it has loaded. This might negate the hosting issue for simpler things, but often won't for more complex issues. It also brings with it a whole host of other complexities and potential security implications, meaning it might not be a viable option in most cases.

Paid Search
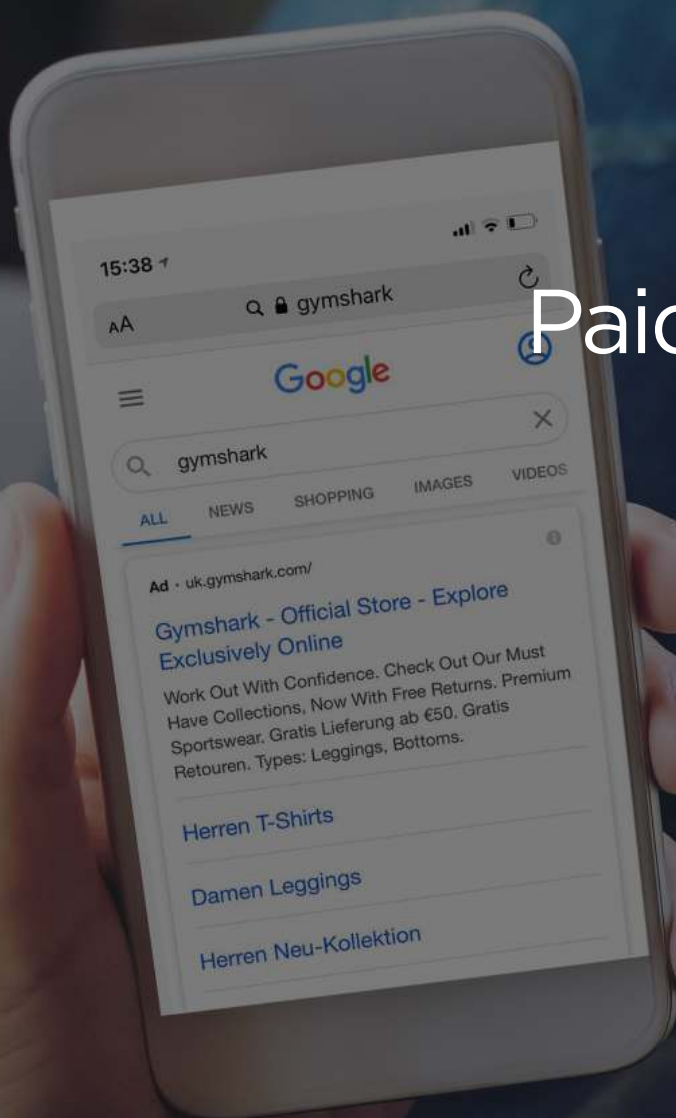
Does Shopify Integrate With Google Ads?

In short, yes. Google offers seamless integration with the inventory available in your Shopify store. The app makes it really easy to promote your products by integrating directly with Google Ads and Google Merchant Centre.

You will be able to run Smart Shopping campaigns and also list your products for free if you are based in the US. There has been a lot of discussion around the pros and cons of running Smart Shopping campaigns, but Google is definitely pushing marketers to take this route.

If you do opt for Smart Shopping campaigns, all you have to do is sync your products and set your daily budgets; Google will do the rest. They will optimise your campaigns and figure out what's the best time and day for your ads to appear to attract more shoppers.

These free listings are a relatively new feature and only offered to the US market for now, with plans for it to be rolled out towards the end of 2020. In some respects, this brings Organic Search and Paid Search together. Having an optimised source will not only enable us to achieve better relevancy in paid search but also give us better exposure within organic shopping results.

This new feature will be welcome for everyone, from e-tailers to stores that rely on dropshipping. This could be motivated by the fact that shopping is known to be a price-driven platform and some retailers are actually running on very tight margins, making it difficult to make any profits. Google's integration with Shopify means that businesses will be able to tap into this new opportunity as soon as it becomes available, without any hassle.

Feed Management

Shopify creates a content API which, like any other feed setup, is only as good as the data entered in the store. There are multiple options available to push the data into the merchant centre:

- **You can use Google's official app** for a good basic setup
- **You can also use the 3rd party apps** available in the shopping stores if you would like a more advanced setup that allows you to slice and dice data
- **You could create a feed based on Shopify JSON data** if you would like to plug the data into traditional feed management platforms like Shoptimised

Overall, there are plenty of options available, and there are no limitations or impact on your paid search or shopping activity

Does Shopify Integrate With Bing Ads?

Out-of-the-box Shopify doesn't integrate with Bing shopping. There are plenty of applications that send your Shopify store's products to Bing Merchant Center simply and easily, and keep them up to date as the store changes.

This could be an important consideration for someone considering migrating over to a Shopify platform, as although there are apps available, it could add another layer of complications to a site that makes considerable use of Bing Shopping.

The Difference Between Shopify and Shopify Plus

The biggest difference - from a business perspective - is the price, with most merchants using Shopify Plus paying the monthly standard fee of $2,000.

Because of the extra expense, Shopify Plus is geared towards enterprise-level companies, while the standard Shopify will probably be absolutely fine for the majority of smaller businesses.

Shopify Plus allows merchants to run multiple stores from one account; in standard Shopify, it's one account for one store. It can also handle more transactions per minute so, again, particularly useful for large websites that deal with a lot of traffic.

Shopify Plus also contains custom development areas such as the checkout page, which cannot be changed in Shopify. You are able to run automation scripts in Plus for added flexibility. You also get extra support, although the standard support is impressive in itself, so smaller businesses shouldn't feel as though they have to upgrade for better support services.

Shopify standard also has a limit on traffic levels where Plus doesn't, but this is set so high that it should never worry the average store.

What to Look
For in a Theme
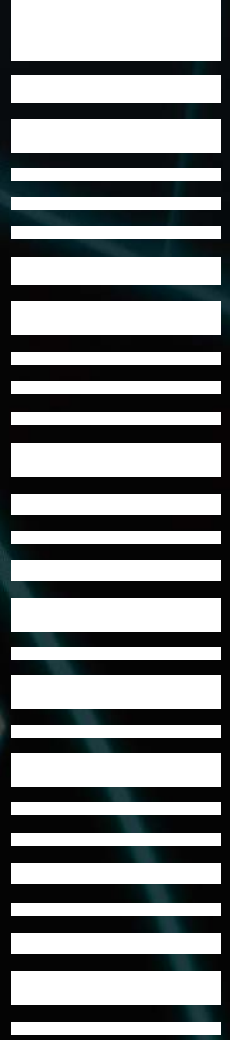
Arguably, the most important aspect of a theme is speed. While design and number of options are also going to be key factors in deciding what theme is right for you, we recommend keeping speed front of mind throughout the decision-making process.

You can run your chosen theme through PageSpeed Insights to check that it's fast (and that it works) and makes changes accordingly.

Different themes can be customised to different levels. Some available themes offer quite a lot of adjustment and customisation, but they tend to be more bloated and therefore slower, while others are lighter and quicker but with less flexibility.

You can always try a new theme, although we'd always recommend testing this outside of the live environment, or even download one to save for future use.

The decision really is yours, but with website speed so important for conversion rates and SEO performance, ignoring this factor could prove hugely detrimental.

Which Third-Party Apps are Must-Haves?

Obviously, businesses will all have different needs and requirements, but there are a few third-party apps that can add extra layers of important functionality to any site. Some of our favourite apps in the Quickfire Digital office:

- **Smart Search & Instant Search by Searchanise** - for searching, filtering and cross- and upselling
- **Advanced Custom Fields by ArenaCommerce** - meta fields beyond the standard for products and customers
- **Smart Wishlist by Webmarked** - a simple, customer-friendly wishlist option
- **Klaviyo: Marketing Automation by Klaviyo** - automated emails, SMS, notifications including cart abandonment and win-back emails
- **Selly - Promotion and Pricing by Treedify** - provides the ability to run multiple discounts and bundles. You can only do one automated discount at a time in Shopify itself

Whats Coming
in Shopify
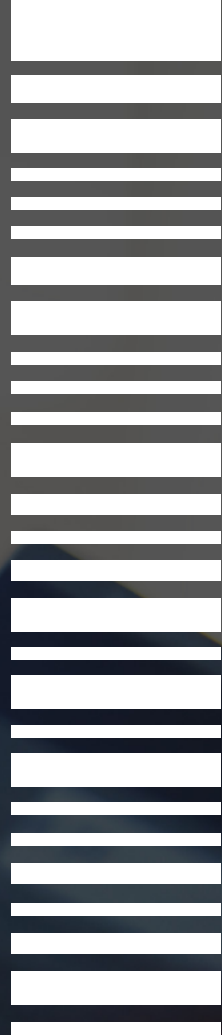
Shopify announced a whole new range of updates coming to the platform in the next few months. These are exciting times for Shopify and they have some really useful features to help entrepreneurs and merchants.

Shop Pay Installments

Shop Pay Installments allow buyers to pay for purchases in four equal payments over time, with no interest or fees. Merchants will receive the full purchase amount upfront, and Shopify will collect the remaining instalment payments, meaning there's no risk to merchants. This flexible payment option will allow buyers to stretch out their payments, making purchases more convenient. This, in turn, will help merchants increase cart sizes and overall sales.

Selling Internationally

Shopify is adding features to the online store that benefit international merchants and their buyers.

Local domains
Merchants will soon be able to use local domains, enabling them to assign individual domains to a country or currency, as well as a language or set of languages. From a search perspective, this will enable companies to effectively use different CCTLD to serve different customers and make their territory targeting clearer to search engines.

Checkout and subscriptions
Shopify has rebuilt the engine that takes a merchant's storefront Liquid theme, and generates the output HTML to send back to a buyer's browser. These updates are rolling out to merchants already. The new renderer will account for a 40% to 200% improvement in load times on live stores, helping users access the products they want quicker.

Storefront Renderer

Shopify has rebuilt the engine that takes a merchant's storefront Liquid theme, and generates the output HTML to send back to a buyer's browser. These updates are rolling out to merchants already. The new renderer will account for a 40% to 200% improvement in load times on live stores, helping users access the products they want quicker.

Online Store Performance Dashboard

Shopify is releasing an online store performance dashboard, which will allow merchants to understand how various actions, such as theme code customisations and app installations, will impact their store's speed. With these changes, merchants will be able to better troubleshoot performance issues and keep their stores fast.

Closing Thoughts
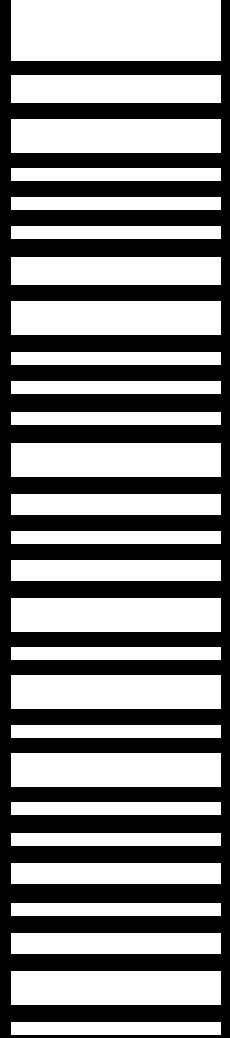
In this whitepaper, we have attempted to bring both perspectives to the table in an attempt to cut through some of the negativity around Shopify and SEO by sharing practical solutions to those problems highlighted by the SEO community.

There is no doubt that Shopify has made its mark on the industry, as it has been widely adopted by entrepreneurs, small businesses and medium to large brands. Shopify has always had a negative perception from the SEO community in particular, but, as we have discussed, the platform is not without merit.

There are some genuine concerns raised by the community, but what's really important for us to understand is that there are solutions out there. The overall benefits Shopify brings to businesses are much bigger than a few SEO issues, especially when those businesses are limited by budget and development capabilities. That being said, Shopify can definitely improve their documentation and offer more help with the concerns raised by the SEO community.

Who are Honcho?

Honcho is a specialist ecommerce search marketing agency that help brands maximise their visibility on Search Engines through SEO and Paid Advertising.

Based in Hertfordshire, Honcho has gained an established position within the digital marketing industry through innovative work, excellent service and high-performance strategies for an impressive portfolio of global brands.

Who are Quickfire Digital?

Quickfire Digital is an e-commerce focused digital transformation agency, helping businesses maximise efficiency, profitability and scalability through the use of technology.

Based in Norwich, in the east of England, the agency specialises in building customised Shopify structures and bespoke Wordpress websites for a range of companies.

To learn more about how Quickfire Digital can help re-platform your store on Shopify or Honcho can help maximise your SEO results please contact us.

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