***Your Web Store's***

***Grand Opening***

*A hosted online storefront solution can launch your*

*e-commerce showroom.*

**WEB STORE**

**PROVIDERS**

**Yahoo! Merchant**

**Starter**

• • • • €

This makes it easy to build

and manage your Web

store. And SiteBuilder 2,1

software is simple to use

yet powerful.

Setup, $50; $39,95 a

month

*go.pcmag.com/^ahoo*

*merchant*

**ProStores**

Not rated

ProStores offers Website

hosting with 5GB

storage space, up to 50

e-mail boxes, and tollfree

24/7 tech support.

$29,95 per month

*www.prostores.com*

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**BY MATTHEW D. 5ARREL**

S A TEENAGKR. I HAD A SUMMER JOB

working in White's B;irnegat Light

Market as a stock boy, Mike White,

the second-generation owner, used to

walk around the store constantly with

a clipboard and take inventory. Then he would walk

back to the stockroom, present us with the clipboard,

and say, "You can't sell a product that isn't

on the shelves." Businesses today don't rely only on

physical shelves but also on virtual shelves. If you're

looking to open a Web storefront, then at the very

least you'll need to build the shelves, stock them,

and provide an easy checkout process.

The first step in building a Web storefront is to

shop for and select an c-commeree service. The

process will be easier and faster if you know beforehand

which features are most important and

how to evaluate them.

One of the most powerful features a hosted

e-commerce solution offers is a w izard that will

take you from start to finish in the development

of a fully operational Web storefront. Along with

the wizard is usually a choice of templates, so you

can update the site. Make sure tha: your provider

offers a template that you can customize easily.

The ability to import catalog data is crucial because

you don't want to waste timi? and employee

resources typing in product information. Equally

*Yahoo! SiteBuilder. the software included with Merchant*

*Starter, uses simple templates and tutorials.*

important is the ability to export data so that you

can track and analyze it locally.

Another vital element is to have multiple ways

to accept payment. PayPal is a big convenience, as

is the ability to process credit cards directly. Also,

a good shipping program is absolutely necessary

for a successful Web storefront. Any hosted

e-commerce solution must include automated

and accurate shipping modules that tie in with the

major shipping companies, such as USPS, UPS,

FedEx, and DHL,

It's not enough merelj' to build a store; you've

got to bring customers in via successful marketing.

Look for a provider that lets you build and

use a mailing list. The ability to run promotions,

such as gift certificates and coupons, and an

affiliate program can also be important. Integration

with XML-based sht)pping feeds, such as Yahoo!

Shopping, is critical because it will increase

your exposure.

The importance of good service and support

at a fair price goes without saying. Make sure that

support is available when you need it and in the

method that you need. You can't underestimate

the value of picking up the phone and straightening

out a problem instantly. Every minute your site

is down or acting fiaky ctmld translate into dozens

of lost sates when users become frustrated and decide

to click somewhere else. Also, make sure to

demo each service that interests you and evaluate

it in terms of the features listed in this articie.

If none of the Web storefront providers seem

right for you, then you may want to consider

building your own site and adding a standalone

e-commerce shopping cart, such as MIVA Merchant

or Actinic Catalog. There arc also plenty of

ASP, PHP, and Perl solutions that a Web developer

can integrate into your site. Whatever solution you

choose, it will definitely save you the headache of

carrying around a clipboard like Mr. White.

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