
Making Joining Easy:

Case of an Entertainment Club Website

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Abstract

The goal of this project was to design a site that would make the online process of joining the Columbia House Music or DVD club faster and easier. Faced with low conversion rates from online advertising, our challenge was to quickly solve the main problems with the existing join process, which were identified through user testing and site data logs.

In response we designed a separate mini-site that reduced the entire process to 3 steps (and as many pages). The Club-based ecommerce experience is unique: the number of products a user selects is fixed, allowing us to implement a unique and transparent interaction model for the shopping cart design.

The project was extremely successful. Conversion rates increased 180%. The design work for this project then set direction for subsequent visual and interface design projects for Columbiahouse.com.

Keywords

Interaction design, Marketing, Shopping cart, Check-out process, music club, Registration process, Joining club, Performance metrics, Usability testing, User experience, User interface, User research, User testing, Visual design, Visual systems, Website

Industry/category

Ecommerce, entertainment, direct marketing, music club, clubs, website

Project statement

The Columbia House Company is the world's largest direct marketer of music, videos and DVDs. Columbia House was established in 1955 and currently has more than 14 million offline and online members. The Columbia House Website (www.columbiahouse.com) was first launched in 1996.

Columbia House is club based. Users join by participating in an initial offering that includes a fixed number of products. Members then interact with Columbia House in much the same way they would with other retailers, purchasing one or more items at a time and take advantage of special offers.

The primary goal of this project was to make the online process of joining the Music and DVD clubs **faster** and **easier** and by so doing increase enrollments in the clubs. This project was initiated because of the very poor conversion rates for users visiting the main Columbia House site (www.columbiahouse.com) (prior to the redesign) from online banner advertisements. While the click-through rates for the banner ads were quite good, conversion rates were extremely low. That is to say, few who visited the site ultimately joined the clubs. Through quantitative site data and qualitative results of usability testing, we attributed the low conversion to the following:

1. Slow loading pages. Prior to the redesign (launched September 2001) the Columbia House site had graphic-heavy pages, which not only added significantly to file sizes but distracted from the primary purpose of the site which is to

display product (i.e. CDs and DVDs) (see figure 1).

2. Unclear join process. The process required users to first make their selections, and then complete a form. Users did not immediately understand that they were to select product prior to "signing up".
3. Too much choice. While Columbia House prides itself on having an extensive product catalog, users confronted with so many choices were often overwhelmed and distracted by them. More, evidently, is not always better.
4. Lengthy and cumbersome checkout process. Prior to redesign, the checkout process on columbiahouse.com extended over five separate pages, consisting of upwards of two dozen steps or entry fields.
5. Insufficient feedback. Because the text line at the top of pages that displayed how many products were currently in the cart was so small, users were not always immediately aware that the product they had selected had been added to the cart. The result: users selecting the same product again and again.

It was evident that columbiahouse.com needed significant improvement. However, given that the need to improve conversion rates was immediate, the team decided to develop a small separate site focused entirely on the join process. The Online Marketing group initiated the project that was then undertaken by the New Product Development group with significant support from the IT organization. Specifically, the goals of the new site, or sitelet, were:

- Create a simple interface that enables users to quickly select multiple products with minimum page navigation and interaction
- Simplify the selection process
- Highlight the order of tasks
- Streamline the checkout process
- Design and develop lightweight pages that load within 10 seconds at slower download speeds (ideally, page source and graphics will total no more than 100K in size compared to the original join pages which are ~190K)
- Double conversion rates
- Design, build, and launch in one month

Project participants

Joe Bilman (Director, New Product Development)

Dan Boyle (Development Lead)

David Braun (Director, Internet Development)

Annette Brookman (Senior Graphic Designer)

Tony Castile (Product Manager)

Dena Fletcher (Director, User Interface)

Ilene Kennedy (Director, Online Product Research)

Melinda Letzig (HTML Developer)

Evan Schwartz (VP, New Product Development)

Project dates and duration

This was an extremely fast-paced project. The user interface and design work was completed in just 2 weeks. From concept to launch the entire project took 20 days. The site launched on March 2nd 2001 as www.chcd.com (the music club), and www.chdvd.com (the DVD club).

Design and development process

The whole team worked together to define the business problem and identify the project goals (described in the project statement).

User Interface and Design

The User Interface (UI) Designer then performed a competitive audit to identify best practices. Included in the review were book clubs and a variety of non-club ecommerce sites. Some of these sites enabled the user to view the contents of their cart during the product selection process but did not allow users to remove items. These sites included separate cart pages where users could change their selections (see figure 2).

A high-level feature list was then defined and agreed to by the whole team.

Wireframes, or sketches, of all pages of the site were created by the UI Designer to illustrate page-level navigation, content blocks, and functional elements (see figures 3 and 4 for examples). The wireframes included a cart integrated into the product selection page. The intent was to include all of the functionality typically found on cart pages.

Building on the wireframes, the graphic designer then created two initial design directions.

1. The first, a simple interaction model where users could see the full selection on a page and would click a CD or DVD image to add that product to their cart. The design used a range of cool colors.
2. The second, which used warm colors including shades of orange and red, used a more complex and engaging interaction model. The product selection was modeled after a jukebox. Only a few product covers were shown and a user would

“flip” through the selection by using directional navigation elements.

Both directions included a visible shopping cart integrated into each product selection page.

The UI Designer and Graphic Designer then worked collaboratively through an iterative design process with the whole project team to refine the interaction design and visual treatments. In the end we preferred the simpler interaction model because it required less navigation on the part of the user. Based on previous testing, we had learned that our users varied significantly in level of online experience. The simple navigation was therefore the best choice for our broad audience.

Since highlighting the order of tasks was a goal of the site, the steps were seen as a key element of the design, and were continually refined. Because the goal was to present descriptive and succinct steps, their names changed several times. The step names changed between the sketch of the homepage (figure 2) and that of the sign-up page (figure 3) as we decided that the integrated cart eliminated the need for a separate cart page. In the final design, the names changed again to be more succinct and simple. The final design is shown in figures 5 through 8 and is described in detail in the “solution details” section.

Documentation

The Product Manager wrote a functional specification document integrating UI, Design and Research documents. This document along with the final designs (in Adobe Photoshop format) served as a guide for the site developers.

User Testing

In order to test the usability of and gauge reactions to the site, we conducted one-on-one interviews with users that were not Columbia House members. The research was planned and led by the Director of Online Product Research. Respondents were selected to represent a cross-section of online users based on gender, age, ethnic background, and Internet experience. They were screened for online purchasing behavior and participation in music-related online activities.

Users were taken to a functional prototype of the site, asked for their initial reactions and were then asked to go through the process of joining the club.

Reactions to the layout and design of the site were very positive overall. Specifically, respondents liked the cart being integrated into the product selection page and that it provided immediate feedback when they added products. Participants responded positively to the color scheme and felt that important elements stood out effectively. Respondents described the experience as “simple” and “fun” and indicated the site made them interested in following the path to join the Club.

Though, overall, reactions to the layout and design of the site were positive, a few issues were uncovered. Specifically:

- There was confusion during the transition from selecting products to signing up. Respondents seemed to expect the site to lead them more into the next step.
- The method of removing products from the cart was not immediately evident to users.

- Not all respondents noticed the text link titles because they were “below the fold”, requiring them to scroll past the images at the top.
- Participants did not always know that the receipt page was the end of the process.
- The distance between the “add” buttons and the product caused some confusion for users.

Solutions to these issues were integrated into the final design which is described in detail in the following section.



Figure 1. The original Columbia House site to which banner advertisements led users

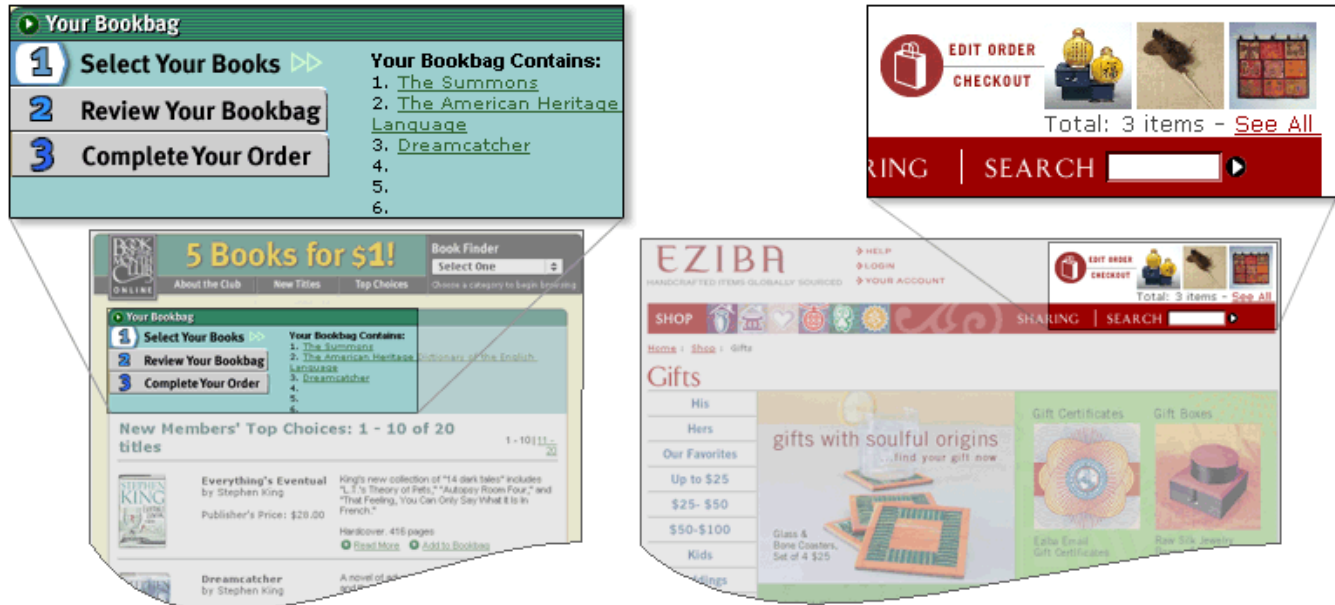


Figure 2. Screen shots of 2 transparent/persistent carts: Eziba and Book of the Month Club

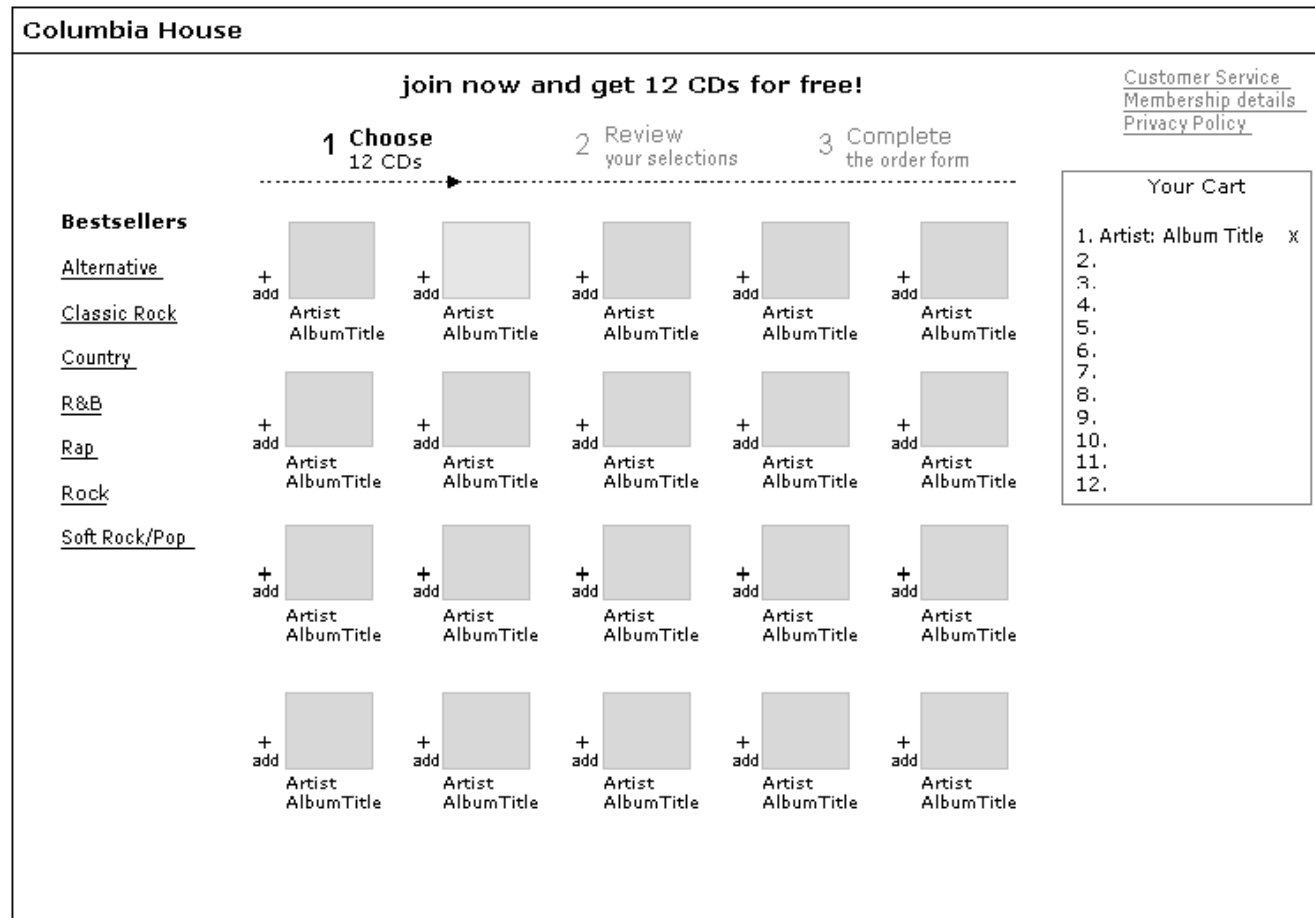


Figure 3. Wireframe of the initial page ("homepage") of the site (step 1)

Columbia House

join now and get 12 CDs for free!

[Customer Service](#)
[Membership details](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)

1 Choose 12 CDs 2 Fill out the order form 3 Confirmation for your records

12 CDs Free!
Shipping & Handling: \$11.88
Total: \$11.88
Taxes will be added in states where applicable

< [Return to selections](#)

Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
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Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title
Artist / Album Title

< [Return to selections](#)

Personal Information

Title: Mr. Mrs. Ms.

First Name: Last Name:

Street Address:

City: State: Zip:

Phone Number: Email:

Payment Information

Credit Card: Card Number: Expiration Date:

MEMBERSHIP DETAILS - PLEASE READ!

Figure 4. Wireframe of the "sign-up" page (step 2)

Columbia House

join now and get 12 CDs free!
shipping & handling only 99¢ per CD

the Music Club

[membership details](#)
[customer service](#)
[privacy policy](#)

1. choose 12 CDs

fill it up! 2. sign up

3. receipt

kind of music
pick from these categories

Bestsellers

- Alternative
- Classical
- Country
- Blues
- Hip-Hop
- Jazz
- Pop/R&B

albums
click on **ADD** to add to shopping cart.
albums with count as two in your cart.
E = explicit content



Various Artists
Charlie's Angels
Soundtrack



Eric Clapton
Clapton
Chronicles:
The Best Of ...



Faith Hill
Breathe



Dido
No Angel



Santana
Supernatural



Yolanda Adams
Mountain High
Valley Low



3 Doors Down
The Better Life



Nelly Country
Grammar



Christina Aguilera
Christina Aguilera



Dixie Chicks
Fly

shopping cart
fill cart with your 12 albums. click **X** to remove albums.

1. **Dire Straits** Sultans Of ... X
2. **Celine Dion** All the Way! ... X
3. **Stevie Wonder** Original ... X
4. **Garth Brooks** Garth Brooks X
5. **Jim Croce** Photographs... X
6. **Britney Spears** Baby One... X
7. **Vertical Horizon** Everything... X
8. **Stone Temple Pilots** No. 4 X
9. **Stevie Wonder** Original ... X

Bedeski, Martin and Wood		ADD
CD Title		
Bedeski, Martin and Wood		ADD
CD Title		
Bedeski, Martin and Wood		ADD
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CD Title		
Bedeski, Martin and Wood		ADD
CD Title		

Bestsellers | [Alternative](#) | [Classic Rock](#) | [Country](#) | [R&B](#) | [Rap](#) | [Rock](#) | [Soft Rock/Pop](#)

you have 9 items in your cart

Figure 5. Homepage design www.chcd.com

ColumbiaHouse.com

join now and get 12 CDs free!

shipping & handling only 99¢ per CD

the Music Club

[membership details](#)

[customer service](#)

[privacy policy](#)

1. chose CDs
2. sign up
3. receipt

12 CDs FREE

subtotal \$ 0.00

shipping & handling \$ 11.88

total \$ 11.88

taxes will be added in states where applicable

[back to choose CDs](#)

your CDs

Behind the Sun / Chicane

The Dropper / Medeski

Greatest Hits / Ella Fitzgerald

The Best of the Song Books / Ella Fitzgerald

Going Home / Duke Ellington

Late for the Future / Galactic

Behind the Sun / Chicane

The Dropper / Medeski

Greatest Hits / Ella Fitzgerald

The Best of the Song Books / Ella Fitzgerald

Going Home / Duke Ellington

Late for the Future / Galactic

[back to choose CDs](#)

personal information all fields required

title Mr. Mrs. Ms.

first name last name

street address

city state

zip

phone number

email

payment information

credit card number

expiration

membership terms

I have read and understand the terms of membership listed above
(This must be checked to continue)

submit application >>




Figure 6. Design of Sign-up page

ColumbiaHouse.com

join now and get 12 CDs free!
shipping & handling only 99¢ per CD

the Music Club

[membership details](#)
[customer service](#)
[privacy policy](#)

thank you!

3. receipt

want more?


That's It! You're Done!

Thank you Selma, for your application to join the Columbia House DVD Club. Please print this page for your records. A copy of this confirmation will be sent to the email address you provided.

movie title	count as	price
Chicane	1	49¢
Medeski	1	49¢
Ace of Base	1	49¢
Number of selections: 3		subtotal \$1.47
		shipping & handling \$ 11.88
		total \$ 13.35

taxes will be added in states where applicable


see what else we have for you...



join the DVD Club >

4 DVDs for 49¢ each!

Figure 7. Design of Receipt page



the
Music Club

[membership details](#)
[customer service](#)
[privacy policy](#)

◀ back to choose CDs

Membership Details

Subheader

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit, sed diam nonummy nibh euismod tincidunt ut laoreet dolore magna aliquam erat volutpat. Ut wisi enim ad minim veniam, quis nostrud exercitation ullamcorper suscipit lobortis nisl ut aliquip ex ea commodo consequat. Duis autem velum iriure dolor in hendrerit in vulputate velit esse molestie consequat, vel illum lunobro dolore eu feugiat nulla facilisis at vero eros et accumsan et justo odio dignissim qui blandit praesent luptatum zzril delenit augue dui dolore te feugait nulla facilisi.

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[▲ back to top](#)

Subheader

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no cards to return ever!

99¢
shipping per CD

◀ back to choose CDs

Figure 8. Design of support page

Solution details

We built a small stand-alone site focusing on a quick and simple join process. We intentionally designed the site to be small. It has only six pages:

1. Product selection page (refreshes with different product as genres are selected)
2. One page sign-up form
3. Receipt page

Three support pages accessible from each of the primary pages:

4. Membership details
5. Help
6. Privacy policy

In an effort to simplify the selection process, we intentionally included only a small portion of Columbia House's large product catalog into the site. The supposition that this will ease the process of selecting products is leant support by the findings of Sheena S. Iyengar (1999), who, in extensive studies on choice, found that "although extensive choice is initially more enticing than limited choice, limited choice is ultimately more motivating". Exactly how many products to feature on the site was a decision made by the team as a whole and based on a number of factors:

- keeping page weight (number of kilobytes) low
- avoiding excessively long scrolling pages
- keeping navigation simple
- providing enough selection to be enticing to users

Through an iterative design process we derived the solution. Design iterations included a version with cover

art (a picture of the product) for each product. This option was rejected, however, because when implemented, the pages would be heavy or require excessive navigation (products would be split onto many pages). Our final solution includes a small number of cover art on each page and up to 10 rows (in 3 columns) of line listings (a product name without art).

To determine exactly how many products to include on the site we looked at data of product sales on the existing site. For the DVD club we found that 100 movie titles represented 80% of product selected by users joining the club. Therefore, in the new site, rather than choosing 4 DVDs from the original selection of 1,700 titles, users are presented the top 100 titles from which to choose. For the music club our data indicated that 400 titles from 8 music genres represented close to 90% of the product selected by users joining the club. Therefore, in the music version, rather than selecting 12 CDs from the original catalog of 16,000 titles, users are presented with 50 top titles in each of 8 genres (reduced from the original 17 genres).

The site emphasizes the offer and guides new members through a simple 3 step process for joining Columbia House.

Highlighting the order of tasks was critical and plays a major role in the design of the site.

Step one, "Choose CDs" prompts users to choose product from the selection and add the desired products to the cart which is integrated into the product selection page (figure 4).

Step two is a 1 page sign up form where users are required to supply personal and payment information (see figure 5).

Step three is a 1 page printable receipt page that provides a confirmation of the transaction to the new member (see figure 6).

Although Columbia House has a long history as an offline direct marketer, at the time this project was undertaken, it had not yet formally established its brand identity online. Columbia House was relying on its long-standing image, that is, its name recognition and reputation among consumers.

For those reasons, and because the site was a quick fix with limited time and resources, the visual branding of the site had to be more tactical than strategic. We collected any available in-house research to understand our club members' habits and preferences. Evaluating the previous site and our current print advertising materials helped us get a clearer idea of the messaging and experience consumers were receiving.

We decided to keep the focus on Columbia House's top functional benefits, our offers. Columbia House is known for its incredible deals on music and movies. Thus, we made the "deal" appear quite prominently on the site. As far as emotional benefits, we wanted the user to feel they were saving money, saving time, having fun, and in control (giving user the power). The tone of the site was developed in line with the company's goals for the site (easy, quick, smart, approachable, lively) and the context of what the company offers (entertainment products).

The elements of the design strategy were to provide an uncluttered stage for the product and process and to create a direct and inviting experience for users. Through our research, we had discovered that though Columbia House has a broad user group across its

clubs, there is a higher percentage of young males in the DVD club. As men tend to prefer bright colors (Radeloff, 1990) we decided to use colors that are bright, warm, and activating. The color is concentrated on the offer, in a reddish hue, and the steps appear in shades of orange and red to guide users through the process. The typography is solid, friendly and slightly conservative. The HTML text is standard (pre-installed on all computers), legible and clean. Product photography is meant to fill the page above the fold, and we leveraged their designs to add excitement to the page. To strengthen the idea of control, we designed the cart to appear as if the user is pushing it. The approach is straight-forward and clean, allowing users to concentrate on the immediate purpose of the site – picking product and joining Columbia House.

What is unique about the design is the cart's accessibility and visibility during the "shopping" process, eliminating the need for a separate cart page. Users get immediate verification of their actions whether they are adding or removing items from the cart. They are also notified when they have fulfilled their selections and automatically directed to the next step in the process.

Post-launch result

With the launch of this site conversion rates from online advertising increased 180%, far exceeding the goal of doubling conversion. Marketing efforts did not change from the time this project was initiated to a period of three months after the launch of the new site. Specifically, the design of banner ads, the offers which they presented, and the placement of the ads did not change. The number of impressions also did not

change. Therefore, we attribute the very large increase in conversion rates to the launch of the new site.

We have recently performed a second round of usability testing so that we can continue to refine the site based on the findings. Each time we perform a test, we uncover additional ways to make the site better based on behaviors of our users. For example, we are increasing the number of selections on the site. The site will continue to offer only a small percentage of the entire catalog, but we are continuously trying to determine the ideal number of products to feature. We are also working to identify the best way to inform users of the larger selection available to them upon membership. We continue to develop additional versions of the site, as evidence by the recent launch of the video club.

Many of the features from this project were integrated into the redesign of Columbia House's primary site, columbiahouse.com. Most importantly, the shopping cart now remains present on all of our joint sites largely due to its unprecedented success. The simplified checkout process was also adopted for the main site.

One year after the launch of this site Columbia House's largest competitor, BMG, has re-launched their site. The new design includes a cart integrated into the product selection pages. Amazon.com has recently added an integrated cart which appears when an item is added. In both cases the integrated cart does not allow users to remove items and both sites include a separate cart page.

Since the project was such a great success we continue to implement many of the features and design principles in other projects.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Liz Danzico for planting the seed of the idea for this case study and for reviewing the submission.

Thank you to Evan Schwartz for reviewing the submission and for providing very helpful feedback.

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