

## Review of the best FREE online e-commerce applications

First question that I'm usually asked before starting working on new store is what software should I use for my store? It is easy to understand for me why all start ups are so confused.

There are almost hundred of different shopping cart solutions, hosted and on-site, commercial and open source. So it's really difficult to make a choice, especially if your future success depends of your right choice. So I will try to explain my point of view to this problem.

### Why Oscommerce family?

First let's discuss why I suggest Oscommerce family ([Oscommerce MS2](#), [Creloaded](#), [Zencart](#)) shopping carts. There are almost dozen really nice shopping cart solutions that are better than Oscommerce - more powerful, more user-friendly, more reliable ([Miva](#) , [VPASP](#) , [ASPdotnetstorefront](#) , [X-cart](#) , [CS-cart](#) , [Cubecart](#) ). But all they have one big disadvantage - they are not FREE. So because Oscommerce is one of the most popular open sourced shopping cart software over the web you will be able to find affordable web developers, affordable support and affordable data entry. If you just starting then you maybe think that you don't need all this side help. But believe me you can't handle this entire staff by yourself. Your store will grow, your customers will start calling you about damaged packages and you will not be able to leave time to make some improvements to your store or add in time new collection of products that you just got from your supplier. So I suggest you to select Oscommerce family software not because it's free but because it's popular. It's the same reason why you are buying car that has service not far from your home.

### Oscommerce

So number one in our review is [Oscommerce MS2](#). It's first most popular shopping cart. Oscommerce project was launched in 2000 and available under GPL license. There is more than 12 000 live store powered by MS2. When you will install MS2 at your server then you will notice that it's lack many of features that other software has. There are more than 4000 contributions available to download. You can ask me what contribution is. Answer is easy - it's modification to Oscommerce core files that will add features you need. Sometimes it looks like real module, sometimes like 2 pieces of code that you should add your store. So Oscommerce is like big Lego. There are some easy and useless contributions but there are a lot of great contributions that you would like to have at your store. Like Gift Certificates, Wishlist, Template system, Affiliate module, Order edit module, different payments and shipping modules and many more. Some are easy to install and some will require good PHP skills and plenty of patience.

So what Oscommerce is good for? I think it's best choice for you if you are skilled PHP programmer or you hired skilled PHP programmer and want to build your own store with option you need. Please don't forget that you will need support all time you will run your store not only at development phase. What is it bad for? I think MS2 is not good for people that like nice comfortable software and want ready from box solution.

Not long time ago Oscommerce MS3 was announced. It's still in development. Oscommerce team have added some contribution to core and also cleaned front-end code so it's CSS based now. But you will have problems installing many contributions developed for MS2.

## Creloaded

[Creloaded](#) is Oscommerce MS2 with almost 50 installed useful contributions. You should notice that this is commercial version of Oscommerce. So you need to pay around 200\$ for PRO version and 350\$ for B2B version. Also you can get FREE version that is not free any more. CRE require 10\$ donation now. Also it will lack of many useful features and you will have CRE banners at your store. So B2B or PRO version is right choice. Because Creloaded has Oscommerce core then you can install additional contributions that where developed for MS2. But you should remember Creloaded has changed db structure and changed file structure so it will not be a piece of cake for you to do and will cost more if you will hire freelancer. Creloaded template system is easy to develop and easy to use.

So what Oscommerce is good for? I think it's best choice for you if you are looking for maximum number of features and want ready from box solution. What is it bad for? I think Creloaded is not good for people that want to further develop their stores and add other contributions.

## Zencart

[Zencart](#) has a lot of features based on Oscommerce but has gone its own way. It was developed and supported by small group of close minded people. You can find them usually at forum and ask some questions but you should remember that they are really busy and can't answer on all users question. What is really good in Zencart is that it was reworked in right way. Zencart admin was reworked and now look really much better then Oscommerce admin. Zencart is also very close to commercial shopping cart software from code quality point of view. But you can not install contributions directly from the Oscommerce web site onto Zen Cart. Many of the nice features are include and many are available at Zencart forum. But from my point of view Zencart still lack of some core contribution that are available for Oscommerce. Zencart templates system is not easy to learn. It consists of many directories and files and it's really difficult for newbie to edit it in right way.

So what Zencart is good for: i think it's really good for zen minded people, that also want to have nice code, nice templates system and nice modular system. But it isn't good for people that want to use many contributions from Oscommerce or additional features. Zencart isn't easy to develop and really hard for Oscommerce contribution

## Conclusion

Hope you are interested in what cart other people usually select. From my experience Creloaded is most popular shopping cart software from Oscommerce family. On second place is Zencart and MS2 is on the third place. Please notice that i don't want to say that there are more Creloaded and Zencart sites then Oscommerce. I think from the point of view of stores number Oscommerce is most widely deployed ecommerce software. But small business owners prefer to use Creloaded because of built-in affiliate module, as well as the powerful admin management features.

After selecting shopping cart you are should decide what hosting provider to chose. There is dozen of review sites over the web. But the problem is that all three this carts can have problems if server is not configured at proper way. Also there is great differ between your personal site hosting and your store hosting. Your store should be 24 hours uptime and it should has additional security features, you should be able to access you hosting support by phone at any time of day. So what is bad choice? I think it will be big mistake to select any crowded hosting like [Godaddy](#) or [1and1](#) for your store. I recommend [Level Ten](#) . Many my clients are using this hosting and really enjoy nice support and ecommerce specialization of this hosting provider. You can select shared hosting or dedicated server. Also a lot s of ecommerce tips available at this site.

Now you have become more confident in your choice and have hosting account so you are ready to start working on your cart. There are 2 possible ways you can go. First one is to hire graphic, designer that will create new original theme for you. Please remember that having professional look of your store as important as having competitive prices. So after designer will create nice theme for you should hire developer that will integrate this theme into your cart. That's it. Usually it will take 2-3 weeks before your store will be ready to test. Second way is buying templates at any online template store. Many of us used templates from Template monster store. Usually you get Adobe Photoshop file and sliced html template. Template monster also provide now Zencart and Creloaded stores templates. From my experience working with this template i can say next: they look good but they are not coded well. It's easy to understand. Template monster is not specializing in ecommerce templates and you can find unhappy clients thread like [this thread](#) these all over the web. I recommend using templates from specialized stores like [Oscommercetemplates](#) or [Websitetemplatedesign](#).

I hope that this article helped you in your choice. Of course this isn't full features review and you can find other comparison at [Ecommerce guide](#).