WHAT IS
CONVERSION RATE
OPTIMISATION?
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Before diving into the world of CRO and all that it has to offer an eager marketer, let’s look at some of the foundational concepts first.

To get a true sense of what conversion is, we need to discuss what it does for a business, and thus establish its importance.

Let us consider a typical business scenario: at the very least, the goal of any business—regardless of sector or industry—is to make a profit through the sale of goods or services. To that end, marketing is used to attract new customers, sales are carried out to exchange goods and services for payment, and finally, customer service is offered to retain customers. *When a marketing strategy successfully results in a sale, that’s considered a conversion.*

Applying the same template to a business website, which can and often does straddle all three functions to varying degrees, one finds that the concept of a conversion is practically the same: a potential customer becomes a customer. Or in more general terms, every time a website user completes a desired action, it is a conversion.
Defining a website conversion

It is tempting, but limiting, to think about conversions only as website sales. Conversions are best thought of as accomplishments of any one of an established list of site goals.

What is a site goal?

For instance, for a website that sells products, an obvious site goal would be the sale of one of its listed products. A sale is a primary site goal in this case.

However there are other actions a user or visitor can take on the website, which may eventually lead to a sale of one of its products. Signing up for a monthly newsletter is a good example. This is a secondary site goal, because it doesn’t directly result in a sale. But it could indirectly influence a purchase decision – and that’s the aspect to focus on.

Micros and macros

So we have primary and secondary site goals, but how do those tie into conversions? Proportionately, as it turns out. When a primary goal is achieved on the website, it is considered a macro-conversion, and when a secondary goal is achieved, it is considered a micro-conversion.

Micro-conversions are not unrelated to macro-conversions. They are the small actions of user or customer engagement that should ideally nurture leads into eventual macro-conversions. Tracking and refining micro-conversions is therefore as critical as optimising for macro-conversions.

So what constitutes a conversion?

After all those details about conversions, it is time to get to the meat of the matter. Where is the list of website conversions that you need to optimise? Short answer: there isn’t one.

Returning to our case study from before, a product-selling website considers a sale to be a conversion. Suppose a website sells subscriptions, which can also be purchased annually. If that website considered a sale [clicking the ‘Buy’ button on the subscriptions page] as a conversion, the conversion rate would be dismal. Dismal is bad, but far worse, it would be inaccurate too, as the conversion rate doesn’t paint the correct image of the website’s efficacy.

Therefore, just as your website is individual to your business, your list of conversions is highly individual to your website also. Figure out which business objectives are being served by the website, and then identify site goals that lead into those objectives. A good place to start is to examine the sales funnel. At the very least, it will yield information about the most important site goals.
The Need to measure Conversions

Conversions are great. Ideal. Excellent in every way. But how do you know if your website has enough conversions or not? Arguably, a website can never have enough conversions; it is definitely a case of “the more the merrier”.

Conversely it can have too few. Without a metric to measure conversions though, there would be no way to know that. And that’s exactly what a conversion rate is: a metric which ascertains the percentage of visitors completing a desired action on the website.

There are multiple metrics available to ascertain whether or not the website is successful. Analytics will yield much of that information: number of visitors, most visited pages, and so on. Then why does one need conversion rates at all, considering there is already a plethora of information available for the marketer?

The insights that conversion rates yield are goal-oriented, and thus far more granular. *If a particular conversion rate is low, then a marketer is spurred on to discover the underlying reasons and fix them.*
Now that we've established what conversion is, and why it is relevant, we will explore each of its aspects in greater detail, starting with a list of commonly used terms.

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<th>Term</th>
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<tr>
<td>Conversion</td>
<td>When a website user or visitor accomplishes a website goal, the general term used to describe this desired action is conversion. Site goals, as we will see going forward, can differ greatly from website to website.</td>
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<td>Conversion rate</td>
<td>The ratio of website users or visitors to the number of conversions is known as the conversion rate. This metric is often used to determine the success of an individual page, a funnel, or the website as a whole.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversion rate optimisation</td>
<td>The careful application of marketing strategies, analysis, testing, and innovation to the website in order to increase the conversion rate.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversion funnel</td>
<td>It is the path taken by a potential customer through the website to become a customer. The funnel is depicted as an inverted pyramid, where the top (widest part) of the funnel represents the total audience, and the bottom (narrowest part) of the funnel is the conversion event.</td>
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<tr>
<td>User flow</td>
<td>It is the path taken by a website user to complete an action. User flows aren’t restricted to just conversion events, but also include general paths like finding support on a website or adding an item to a wish list.</td>
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Now that we have established a few of the terms we will be using throughout this article, we will tackle each aspect of CRO in greater depth.
The Heart of the matter: Conversion Rate Optimisation [CRO]

To put it simply, CRO is the practice of improving a website’s conversion rate. It comprises many methodologies and complex strategies, while requiring a deep understanding of user behaviour and patterns, but its ultimate goal is to increase the number of users performing desirable actions on the website. If there are any areas that cause roadblocks for conversion, these are known as barriers, and will be referred to as such hereafter. Your entire focus is to remove any and all barriers – that you can – to conversion.

CRO is not a magic solution that is applied once and forgotten thereafter. It is an iterative process, like any other facet of marketing. There is no expectation that an ad will be relevant for decades, and the same logic applies to the CRO process.
The Importance of analytics

Identify, if you haven’t already, the funnels of your website. What are the entry points? Where to people drop off? Where would you ideally like them to go? This is a good place to start grappling with the concept of funnels from the point of view of conversion.

Analytics shows you what is happening on your website, no less and no more. We will come to the importance of gathering data in the section on building a CRO plan, but rest assured that without analytics, you would be flying blind. Make sure your funnels and goals are set up correctly. Here is an excellent guide that should be your starting point, if you don’t already have something set up.

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Some typical metrics to track through analytics are as follows:

- Traffic sources and channels
- Users: new and returning
- Bounce rates
- Page views
- Time spent on pages
SEO and CRO

Depending on who you ask, the strategy used to increase website conversions is generally one of two options: SEO or CRO. This begs the question: which one works better for conversions?

SEO came before CRO, and so there is more knowledge available about SEO techniques. The supporting logic is also sound: you will get more conversions if you can increase website traffic. Practitioners will recommend SEO techniques to increase conversions, and they wouldn’t be wrong. Then where does CRO fit into this process?

The answer to this debate of SEO vs. CRO isn’t one or the other; it’s both. The ideal strategy to adopt, when trying to increase conversions, is the middle ground of optimising the website with data-driven changes using CRO, and then plugging those insights into SEO strategies attract a wider audience and thereby augment traffic to the website. In short, the two systems are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary practices.
Building a conversion rate optimization plan

Now that we have talked all about conversions and how important they are, it is time to dive into the actual process of CRO. We have waxed eloquent about how it is a data-driven process, and how it needs to be planned out and applied systematically.

In this section, we break down that process into actionable points that you can apply directly to your website.

Data gathering

Any viable plan starts with data. You must have information at hand to know where to start, where you want to go, and how to get there. So where are the places you go to get information?

- Business objectives:

  The website fulfils certain business objectives, or at least it should. Revisiting your business objectives is a great place to start with CRO data gathering, because you start at the foundation of your business, thus resulting in a more robust and stronger eventual CRO plan. List out your business objectives, and compare and contrast it to your website goals.
• **Talk to your customers:**

They are the audience after all, so consider their opinions when making changes. There are several ways to gather customer insights at this stage, and work with the methods that suit your organisation best.

**Become the customer:**

Try using your website as a customer, and putting aside all the information you know about it already. You know that a certain product is listed on a certain page, but will someone who is visiting your website for the first time know that too? For instance, test the functionality of a search bar with variations of keywords. Do the correct results show up? Have you accounted for spelling mistakes? These are small areas that cause friction in user flow, and a good place to implement fixes that will be invisible but make a huge difference.

**Talk to support staff:**

Customer-facing employees have great insights into the customer mindset, simply because they are dealing with them on a day-to-day basis. Mine that resource for nuggets of information. What do the customers complain about the most? Do they ask for information that is already on the website, but they can't find easily? Again, mostly easy fixes with huge payoffs in terms of usability. The bonus here is that you will relieve some of the support staff’s workload in the bargain.

**Surveys:**

Ask your customers what they feel. Well-designed, to-the-point surveys are an excellent way to connect to a customer, and show them that their input is valued and welcome. You will get ideas directly from the target.

• **Website usability funnel:**

Here is where your established analytics will yield critical information. We talked about the sales funnel earlier on, where you have an established flow of user movement across the website to conversion. You start with the total audience, and mark out the steps to conversion. Where are the customers dropping off? Why are they dropping off at those points? Again, you cannot possibly address all the reasons there may be for drop-offs, but you can address the site-specific ones.
User testing and heatmaps:

Heatmaps are invaluable resources to ascertain how a user consumes your website. Which areas get the most attention? Do you have static text that gets clicks, therefore indicating that it looks like a link but isn’t? Heatmaps are a veritable goldmine, and we have a guide dedicated specifically on how to get the most out of them.

Look for opportunities:

Moving away slightly from the problem-solution dynamic, think creatively about making the user flow better or more user-centric. Can you do away with some steps? At this point, don’t look at competition for inspiration: you are searching for answers that will make you stand out above the competition, so ideally they shouldn’t have them!

Have you considered increasing the average order value (AOV)? Read a little more about a different way to up your conversion rate.

Types of CRO research: Quantitative and qualitative research: As the names may imply, the two types of research important in a CRO plan refer to the form those insights take. Quantitative research is a numbers game, where data comes in from analytics, answering questions like: how many, where, and what. Qualitative research is the why behind those numbers, and comes in the form of opinions and subjective answers.

Both types are important for viable CRO planning, but which comes first? There are different schools of thought on this question, but our vote goes to quantitative first, at least for marketers just starting out with CRO. Numbers are a great way to get concrete facts. For example, the bounce rate on such-and-such a page is too high, and thus needs to be fixed. You have identified a problem quickly, and can move on to the process of finding a solution, using qualitative data to fill out the knowledge gaps with reasoning behind the numbers. Therefore, your approach is structured and purposeful.
Building Hypotheses

Your data gathering exercise, if carried out well, will have given you a list of things that you can improve. This can run the gamut from concrete areas that require redevelopment and work, to conceptual issues that require rethinking user flows or overhauling entire pages. Regardless of the type, you can now condense the information into actual problems that have to be solved. This list forms the basis of your CRO plan. What happens next?

- **Formulate potential solutions:**
  How can you address and mitigate issues that have arisen during your data gathering exercise? What components need changing? Do you need to add new components, or remove others? Some problems can be solved in a multitude of ways, and you will have to decide whether to try out all the solutions or pick the ones that suit your needs.

- **Form hypotheses:**
  Your website has a problem. You have devised a solution. You expect the solution to have an effect on the problem statement, and thus there is an outcome you anticipate. This is known as a hypothesis. Testing the implementation of your solution, to see whether or not it confirms your hypothesis, will determine whether the experiment is a success or failure. Hypotheses are vital for experiments, as they set expectations and therefore provide a framework to analyse and make sense of results.

- **Baseline data and tracking:**
  To establish a starting point for CRO experiments, make sure you have all your existing data in place. Thus, when results start coming in, they can be compared to a baseline. For the results, adequate tracking is very important. Assign metrics to areas in which you want to see improvement, and keep a watch on how they fluctuate in response to your implemented solutions.
Prioritise:

While it sounds amazing to try out every creative solution that everyone in the team conceptualises, realistically that’s not feasible. Consider the importance of the problems based on the impact the results should have, the availability of resources [time, money, and manpower], and then devise a plan for implementation. There are problems that are critical to solve: people can’t find the subscribe button easily on the page – high priority; the social media sharing icons are unevenly spaced by a few pixels – low priority. That is not to say that all problems are not worth solving, but start with the ones that net you the most gains.

Development of variants

It is time to set the plans in motion: start development of your changes. More often than not, this will involve engineering, design, and content teams to come together with different pages to what is already on the website. Here are a few things you need to stay on top of, at this stage:

Use resources wisely:

Depending on the solution you are implementing, the changes can be small or vast, and having options in the form of variants is a good way to move forward. Be warned though: developing and testing too many variants is a waste of resources, so create a few great solutions that you believe will fulfil your hypothesis and use those for CRO testing.

Check technical feasibility:

It is tempting to design an extraordinary website which is exciting from a design perspective. However, stay grounded in the knowledge that a website that does its job well, is better than one that just looks good. Technical feasibility is an important consideration, and the engineering team’s input insofar as load times, security concerns, and other factors that affect development, usability, and infrastructure.
• **Segmentation:**

   It is always a good idea to target your tests towards a specific audience. After all, you’ve created variants keeping a particular persona in mind. Chances are that people who conform to that persona will show the most accurate test results – good or bad. Segmentation will make your results relevant.

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**Running the experiment**

There are various ways to run tests for CRO: A/B testing, usability testing, and more. Consider the solution you are implementing, and how the changes will be best measured with minimum disruption to user experience. Just before the test gets underway though, there is one more check to carry out.

Analytics are the foundation of any optimisation drive, and they needed to be in place well before the development stage, with the metrics clearly defined and earmarked for tracking. Nevertheless, at this juncture, revisit the metrics that you will track for your tests. Are you looking to increase signups, or decrease the bounce rate? A quick check to see that everything is ready for test deployment is good practice.

*Run your tests and track the results in real-time. Set a timeframe for each test, and stick to it. Resist the urge to respond to results instantly though, and wait for the test to run its course. Altering test parameters in the middle of a live test can create disruption and mangle results. Be patient.*

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It is important to incorporate cross-browser testing into your testing process. User experience can vary considerably across platforms and browsers, and it can have a huge impact on your conversion rate. A negative experience is entirely avoidable with cross-browser testing, and should be a staple of your test suite.
Review

Be patient till your test completes. At the metrics stage of the process, there is a time limit set on how long a test should run, before it is deemed to have reached statistical significance. [We’ll be discussing the importance of statistical significance in greater detail later in the article.] Once this point is reached – and only when this point is reached – should the test be stopped and the results considered whole.

This is a good time to review the hypothesis, and line up the metrics alongside. Was your hypothesis borne out by the results? If it was, that’s great! You move onto the next stage of bringing the implementation into your production environment with the help of the engineering team.

What if your hypothesis failed though? It is completely all right. It just means that you have to revisit your solutions. It is a learning experience to analyse the reasons why a particular test failed to produce the anticipated results. Those reasons become fodder in the next test’s data gathering stage. No test is wasted, since there are always insights to be gained.

Repeat

Conversion rate optimisation isn’t a one-time exercise; it is an iterative and continuous process towards improvement and growth. Therefore, once your tests are done and dusted, there is no question about calling it a day. Your first crack at it was just the beginning. **Expand on the winners, refactor the losers, and consolidate all the knowledge you gain in the process.**

Building a knowledge base with your findings from each test is excellent practice. Not only will you have a ready reference for the future, but it becomes an invaluable data mine for other aspects of the organisation. Start small, and add regularly. Sooner or later, the small reference will be huge.
What is statistical significance and its relevance to CRO?

Statistical significance is a much used and rarely understood term in CRO. It refers to the probability that the result generated by a test is caused by reasons other than by mere chance.

The math

This section gets a bit heavy on the math, but it is worth understanding the nuts and bolts of this system to be able to really grasp its importance. There are a few components involved in the determination of statistical significance:

- **Hypothesis:**
  
  We are already familiar with how hypotheses work. One makes an assumption about a cause-and-effect relationship called a hypothesis. Tests are then carried out to see whether or not that hypothesis is correct and valid, or not. The evidence generated by the test should ideally support or disprove the hypothesis conclusively.

- **p-value:**
  
  The probability of observing a difference, if there is no difference. This sounds confusing, but it basically refers to the probability that test results will show that a hypothesis is true, but those results are only due to chance and not the reasons mentioned in the hypothesis.

  The most commonly used value is 0.05, which means that there is a 5% chance that results have occurred at random. This is considered an acceptable level of error for tests, as there is no way that anyone can ever be 100% certain that test results are correct.

- **Confidence level:**
  
  Closely tied to the p-value, the confidence level is the probability that the test results have occurred due to reasons other than chance. It is measured in terms of percentage, and with a p-value of 0.05, the confidence value is 95%.

Why is statistical significance important for CRO?

The idea behind using statistically significant data is to ensure that the results are valid data. By allowing a test to reach a 95% confidence level, you are effectively saying that there is only a 5% chance that the results have come about by random chance, and therefore you can reasonably act upon those results.
How to ensure statistical significance

Thankfully for those of us who are not mathematically inclined, most CRO tools will calculate the threshold of statistical significance for the marketer. Having said that, it is helpful to know some of the factors that go into the calculation behind the scenes:

- **Adequate sample size:**
  
  You want to have enough people participate in the test to generate sufficient data to make the results relevant. The more people that participate, the more accurate the results will be. Too few, and the results will not be valid, and have a greater chance of having occurred due to a multitude of unrelated reasons.

- **Sufficient test time:**
  
  There are several reasons why results can be overwhelming positive or negative in short spans of time. There could have been a marketing blitz which causes traffic to surge temporarily, or there could be server outages that prevent whole swathes of people accessing the website. A longer time frame ensures that these spikes in data are evened out.

- **Segmentation:**
  
  Randomised sampling, especially when dealing with multiple variants, is an important consideration of statistical significance. If there is a split between the audience, on the basis of source traffic for example, then the traffic needs to be split across the variants equally. If all the email traffic is sent to one variation, and all the social media traffic is sent to another, then the results of the variants are not comparable.

**Note:** Sometimes results can be statistically significant AND show a clear difference. However, it is vital to assess the practicality of implementing those results. If the conversion rate changes dramatically, then it makes sense to implement that hypothesis. If not, then it make well be worth the effort to construct a new test altogether.
How to do CRO even without much website traffic

As a general rule of thumb, the more traffic a website gets, the less time it will take to achieve a statistically significant result. However, lower traffic is not a reason not to carry out CRO, but the scope will necessarily be limited.

**Go big or go home:**
If you are looking to make changes to a website with low traffic, then consider making those changes big. Testing small changes will not justify the effort or resources of CRO implementation.

**Focus on the big picture:**
Macro-conversions should take centre stage here. Forget about button colours and banner placement. Follow the money and track the revenue.

**Reduce test scope:**
Variants require traffic to generate results, so with less traffic, don’t test too many variants in one shot. You’ll end up with a dribble of traffic on each variant, and waiting indefinitely for statistically significant results.
Building a conversion rate optimization plan

There are lots of ways employing CRO techniques will positively impact your website. Some of these benefits will come as no big surprise; but there are subtler ways in which your website will benefit from CRO:

- **Understanding your audience better:**
  The methods of CRO yield much insight into the behavioural patterns of the audience. Additionally, the process helps to fine-tune the communication with said audience. The same information can be used in SEO to attract the right audience to the website in the first place.

- **Acquisition of new customers:**
  Building upon the first point, using the correct language to attract your key audience will drive up the number of visitors to your website, who are then more likely to convert. It is a benefit of SEO which in turn impacts CRO again. Win-win.

- **Identify blockers to conversion:**
  CRO techniques take the guesswork out of design, development, and content decisions. While people in-house create a website with the best of intentions in mind, these intentions are not always communicated effectively and could send the wrong message to users unintentionally. This could well mean the difference between a conversion and a drop-off. CRO identifies these spots with actual data, and helps you find solutions. [We will be covering some typical blockers to conversion in the next section.]

- **Encourage repeat custom and reduce churn:**
  Audiences are not limitless, and attracting new customers is more expensive than encouraging existing users to convert multiple times. Optimising an existing website, by making changes with lower resources, can have a significant impact, and thus is an excellent way to maximise ROI.
What are the typical barriers for conversion?

There could be any number of reasons why someone chooses not to convert on a website. While there is certainly no way to address them all – being as some of these reasons may well be unrelated to the website altogether – there are definitely those that can be smoothed out.

These are the few blockers that are typically seen across websites, which are easily fixed through the use of CRO techniques. Our list is meant to cover the usual culprits and thus get you started on your CRO journey, but by no means is it an exhaustive list.

Lack of trust

With the proliferation of scammers online, customer scepticism is very much a given. Consider the psyche of someone shopping online, and evaluate your website from their perspective. Does it convey trustworthiness? Are there customer reviews on your website? How do they know your website isn’t one of thousands out to unlawfully separate them from their money? Address these questions with adequate communication, and with a transparent security policy.

Poor communication:

Although adequate communication is subjective to the audience in question, there has to be the bare minimum of messaging about your product or service, and your company. For instance, when purchasing a physical product, most customers would want to know the shipping policy in place. Is shipping extra? What countries are serviced? And so on. Leaving out this information would most likely result in a missed conversion. Thus, while it may be impossible to address all customer queries, at least ensure that the critical information is available and easily understandable.
Bad design or UX:

Poorly designed websites result in many conversions drop-offs. By now, responsive website design for several screen sizes should be an absolute given, and yet so many websites neglect to perform any sort of cross-browser testing. It then becomes a frustrating experience to navigate a poorly designed website on a handheld device, and thus a customer is lost. As a corollary, a poorly conceived user experience can also hamstring website performance.

The importance of website flow in CRO

User flow is often talked about in website design, but what does it mean exactly? Flow describes the user’s journey across the website. The smoother you can make that journey, the fewer barriers there will be, and thus the more conversions you are going to get. Therefore user flow is very important in CRO.

Consider using the AIDA framework, which describes the different stages within a customer’s decision-making process. AIDA stands for: Awareness – Interest – Desire – Action.

Read more about the principles of AIDA here.
Best practices of CRO

By now, we’ve established all there is to know about getting started with your own CRO plan. In this section, let’s quickly review some of the vital aspects you should keep in mind when bringing CRO into your digital marketing playbook.

- **Data-driven hypotheses:**
  Guesswork rarely yields consistent results. Use information gathered from various sources to substantiate your CRO plan. This approach will also weed out trivial changes that commonly masquerade as ‘best practices’ online.

- **Clear hypotheses and reasonable tests:**
  Don’t test too much at once.

- **Use segmentation:**
  Targeting an audience will generate the most usable insights.

- **Be patient:**
  Let tests run their course. Pulling out early from tests is never a sound strategy.

- **Customise your CRO plan:**
  There is a plethora of knowledge available online for the marketer just starting out with CRO. There are checklists of quick changes that can be easily implemented, which promise dramatic jumps in conversions. These get-conversions-quick strategies are rarely as successful as they claim, and lack the foundation to be genuinely helpful. Of course, there are helpful guides around [this is one!] but use the insights offered within the context of your organisation.

- **Prioritise:**
  Yes, micro-conversions are very important. Yes, they lead up to macro-conversions. Yes, they should be considered in a CRO plan. However, adopt a balance. Macro-conversions directly add to the bottom line, so by definition they are the most important. Don’t miss the forest for the trees.

- **Have reasonable expectations:**
  CRO is not consistent across industries and even across websites in the same vertical. A solution that causes someone’s CRO to jump by 200% may not have such startling consequences for your website. Try out strategies, keeping the individuality of your organisation in mind.
Let’s start optimising

After the information overload in this guide [although some guides are even more mind-boggling], we’ve cobbled together a couple of checklists to kick-start your CRO plan. Bear in mind, these are NOT silver bullets; they are solely intended to give you ideas for optimisation.

**Pages to optimise:**
- Home page and other landing pages
- Product pages
- Pricing and checkout pages

**Solution strategies:**
- **User experience**
  - Streamline navigation
  - Intuitive search
  - Speed
- **Build trust**
  - Communicate at every stage
  - Increase trust signals across the transaction process
  - Make support easy to obtain
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