

Selling Online: What You Need to Know Before Making The Leap



C L E V E R C O N C E P T S

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More and more local businesses are venturing in to e-commerce as it can vastly expand your business, allowing you to reach customers outside the area, and better serve those customers in the area. There are a lot of decisions to be made when taking your business online. All of these factors should be carefully considered in order to make your online venture a success

Design

The design of your site is just as important as its functionality. The design of the site gives the visitor their first impression of your company. When shopping online, visitors will quickly click the back button if they see a site they don't like. To help determine the design style you like, look at other online stores in your same line of business to see what they're doing right and wrong and use that as a guide. Take a look at your type of business and market and design the site around what your customers would like to see.

E-Commerce Software

There are 3 options for e-commerce software – 3rd party services, customized out-of-the-box programs, and completely custom solutions.

3rd party services are simple e-commerce solutions that require very little work to get set-up, but lack some of the advanced features found in the other e-commerce solutions. An example of a 3rd party service is PayPal. These services often require the visitor to leave your web site in order to complete their order. Most visitors don't feel comfortable with these solutions as they don't look professional and will look for another web site to shop at. If you're looking for a quick and easy way to sell online, you might want to consider a 3rd party service. If you're looking for a larger, professional online presence, consider the other options.

There are a number of good out-of-the-box e-commerce suites available that are very powerful and allow web developers to integrate in to a custom web design. These solutions provide a lot of great features like user accounts, coupon codes, ties in to shipping services and credit card services, and have powerful administration tools to manage your storefront. While these software packages are very powerful, they are primarily meant for businesses that standardized products that don't have unique needs.

If your online storefront has custom needs – needs that can't be met by out-of-the-box e-commerce suites – you'll need to have a custom storefront created. A custom e-commerce system is 100% tailored to your needs, but can be the most expensive approach.

Shipping

Shipping charges are very difficult to calculate because there are so many variables involved – weight and box size are the two biggest. It's best to know going in to it that your web site won't be able to calculate precisely what your shipping carrier will charge you. The most accurate approach is to calculate weight and tie in to your shipping carrier's web site to calculate shipping, but that requires inputting weights of all of your products, which if you have a large inventory, can be very time-consuming. Some of the most common ways to calculate shipping:

- Flat rate shipping – one shipping price for all orders
- Order total-based shipping – shipping based on the total amount of the order
- Weight-based shipping – shipping based on weight ranges
- Real-time shipping – shipping based on weight and zip code, calculated via UPS, FedEx, USPS shipping calculators

No matter which approach you choose, after fulfilling some orders, you'll get a better idea of shipping charges and can fine-tune your shipping settings to best meet your needs.

Payment Services

Credit card payments are the way to go for online payments. In order to accept credit cards, you will need a merchant account, which can be obtained from your bank. In order to charge and decline credit cards on-the-fly, you will need a payment gateway service. Payment gateway services not only allow your web site to charge credit cards, but they capture the credit card number for you, thus relieving you of the liability of storing customer credit cards.

Marketing

Unlike physical storefronts which have public visibility, online stores don't just get stumbled across while driving down the road. In order to get visitors to your web site, you will need to rely on both traditional marketing techniques as well as online marketing. Some of the most common online marketing tools include pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, banner advertising, and online comparison shopping services. Marketing is just as important as the design and development of your site as you could have a beautiful web site but unless you have visitors coming to it, you won't get any business.

Choosing a Web Developer

When taking your business online, unless you have a lot of experience with the web, you'll want to find a web development firm to partner with to make your dream a reality. When choosing a web developer, always look at their portfolio to determine their capabilities. If you do not like what they've done in the past, you probably won't like what they'll produce for you. Pick the top three web developer candidates and set up a meeting to interview them and discuss your needs. In the meeting, make sure they show you some examples of their e-commerce sites and the tools they'll provide to you to maintain your storefront. After each of the developers submit their proposals, compare what they have to offer and choose the company that has the best offering for the best price. It's never a good idea to solely look at price as a cheap web site that doesn't function won't do you any good.

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