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E-commerce for the Long Haul

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Launching into online sales, or e-commerce, is, in the best of times, a big change fraught with complications. The reality of online sales isn't going away, though. Now that they've had a taste of the convenience of pickup and delivery, many are going to expect it forevermore. It will also likely be a long time before many of your customers feel safe shopping in store (or are recommended to be out and about, depending on their age).

Here's how to implement long-term e-commerce without making yourself crazy.

Evaluate Resources

As you move away from on-the-fly solutions, it will pay to take a hard look at your resources, starting with the people working for you—including yourself.

Are you willing or do you have the time to learn new technology? If you can't, do you have someone on staff who can? Real talk: If you grumble at things like email marketing, the slowness of your computer or have trouble finding answers for yourself by performing online searches, you'll likely give up before you start.

If you do have a staff member that understands tech and is willing to learn, you're much more likely to succeed and keep succeeding. The importance of the right people to make e-commerce work cannot be understated. Note: Even if (and you likely will) hire a web developer, you still need someone on staff (in store or as a remote contractor) who's comfortable with technology to actually manage the website.

There are other resources to evaluate, including:

• Money: What funds are you willing to allocate toward e-commerce development? (Include personnel time and platform/hosting costs.)

• Equipment: Do you have an adequate camera (most smartphone cameras will work) to take product photos and do you know how to transfer those photos to your computer? Is your computer fully updated with antiviral software and the latest versions of your web browser (such as Firefox, Chrome or Safari)?

• Software: Are you proficient in Google sheets, or do you have Excel or the ability to export product details into an Excel spreadsheet? Are you comfortable with Dropbox or GDrive to transfer photo files for uploading? Do you know how to size photos for the web? Is your website hosted on a reliable host that performs nightly backups? (Hint: For a good website host, expect to pay at least $20 to $30 a month. (A $5/month plan isn't usually adequate for e-commerce.) Do you have an SSL?

If the answers to those questions are "no" or "little to none," first you'll need to line up the resources. Otherwise,

you're setting yourself up for frustration and potential security breaches.

Choose a Platform and Shopping Cart

All square on your resources? Time to choose a shopping cart. The shopping cart is the e-commerce part of the website. This is where you'll be looking into open source (example: WordPress) vs. proprietary software (example: Shopify) and is one of the biggest questions people ask when starting an e-commerce site.

The general perception is that proprietary software is paid and open source is free, but that's not necessarily accurate. First of all, costs will vary for both types depending on how many products you want to offer online, how often those products change or update, and the process for uploading. Again—you must factor in personnel costs for any e-commerce work. The costs of managing your site, regardless of platform, will also depend on the clarity of your policies regarding handling questions, returns and refunds.

Proprietary Software Overview

Pros: Lower monetary bar to entry, pre-built platform, including standardized reporting, filters, account controls, themes, hosting and access to curated list of payment processors.

Cons: Expert help is usually more expensive, platforms are inflexible, you're at the mercy of any policy or integration changes. "Were you using MailChimp? Well, our contract with them expired so you can now use X, Y or Z. Oh, and our reporting won't work for MailChimp now. Good luck!"

Ongoing expenses: Monthly or yearly access fees that include hosting, domain name registration, customer service help and custom coding to implement anything that doesn't come with your package, staff time to upload and update products.

Watch out for: Offers for add-on products and services that you don't need.

Open Source Software Overview

Pros: Ongoing help options are plentiful and inexpensive, platform is flexible, can expand almost infinitely and you're not stuck with the whims of another business.

Cons: Higher monetary bar to enter, ongoing costs aren't packaged in one monthly fee.

Ongoing expenses: Website hosting fees, domain name registration, ongoing website updates (between 30 minutes to three hours per month), staff time to upload and update products.

Watch out for: Web developers that encourage a lot of customization. When someone does a lot of customizing, they're essentially hitching you to their wagon for life (or taking away a big advantage of open source software, which is the ability to fire the developer and hire another one, or hire another one if something happens to your developer).

Building on open source does require you to think about the functionality you want before you build. Planning is essential to end up with what you want. Web strategists can help you with this stage by helping you create a work order that will keep the developer from just saying yes to everything you get excited about adding. When you ask an open source developer, can it do X? The answer is ALWAYS yes. This can be freeing or cause a monster problem, depending on your choices.

How to Choose?

If you already have a relatively up-to-date website, look into shopping carts that are available. For example, if you have a WordPress website, you can add the WooCommerce plugin. (And when I say "you," I mean whomever is working on the website—staff or contractor.) If your website is on SquareSpace, you can use their built-in shopping cart. My point is: don't necessarily recreate your entire website on a new platform just to add e-commerce.

Another option is a hybrid solution. If your website has been on WordPress for years, and you're terrified of adding e-commerce to it, you can create an online shop on proprietary platform and just link to the shop (opening in a new window, of course) from your main website.

Upload Inventory

Once you've chosen a platform and configured it, it's time to add products. Produce a digital file that contains the images, short description, long description, product name/title, image file names, prices and attributes (red, white, pink 4-in., 1-gal.) and starting quantity for every product you want to sell online, organized and ready to send to someone. There's no way around this. Somebody has to upload and it shouldn't be the owner. However, in order to get someone else to do it, the information has to be organized.

Does that sound overwhelming? That's one reason why many digital marketing strategists have been recommending batching products for sale online into packages. It'll be easier (not easy, but easier) to maintain accurate inventory if everything isn't "onsey-twosey." If you're going the "one of this, one of that" route and need help, UpWork.com is a great source for freelance data entry and data upload temporary (and long-term) help.

There are many more aspects of e-commerce, but these are the main points you need to cover as you embark on a long-term solution. As you can see, it's the people, not the platform, that will make the most difference in your success.

E-commerce: Learn the Lingo

Shopping Cart: This is the e-commerce part of the website. Customers place items in the cart and then the cart is what handles the logistics of collecting payment and creating order confirmations. WooCommerce is the most common WordPress shopping cart.

Platform: The platform is where your shopping cart lives. Some proprietary solutions have built-in shopping cards. (Shopify is one of the most popular proprietary website/shopping cart services, though options are popping up.)

Payment Gateway: The payment gateway is a third-party service that securely collects online payment. Examples include PayPal, Stripe, Amazon Pay and Google Pay.

Open-Source Software: Open-source software can be modified by anyone with the source code. WordPress is a widely used example. Open-source software is more flexible and you can find an almost infinite number of people to work on open-source software.

Proprietary Software: Proprietary software is closed and only individuals that work for the company, or sometimes licensed individuals, can work on the software. It's less flexible.

Website Host: Where your website lives. (Usually included in proprietary software fees. Separate expense for open-source solutions.) **GP**

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