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E-comm-Curious? Set Up a Gift Shop

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Do either of these sound like you?

• You jumped headfirst into e-commerce (e-comm) during COVID, learned how time consuming and input-heavy it is, and immediately stopped. But you haven't given up on it yet and you'd like to give it another try—in a controlled and well-defined way.

• You haven't tried e-comm yet, but you'd like to. In a controlled and well-defined way.

See a theme? Controlled and well-defined. That's the secret to doing e-comm without losing your mind. End-of-year holidays are (at most) a six- to eight-week period. You can develop, implement and analyze before spring to see if aspects of e-comm as a whole or capsule collection e-comm are avenues for revenue you'd like to pursue. Here's how to do it.

Define Your Goals

Offering e-comm just to offer e-comm is definitely a way to resent offering e-comm! Before you start, decide why you're doing it. Potential goals for a holiday e-comm trial:

• Become familiar with e-commerce technology

• Refine e-commerce fulfillment processes and systems, potentially including delivery

• Offer a convenient service to customers

• Increase holiday sales

• Experiment with a new product mix (such as gift/floral)

• Make a determination whether e-commerce is something you want to offer during other, busier times of the year.

Defining your goal will help the person who's accountable for managing the program understand what data points to track and report. It'll help everyone evaluate the program at the conclusion to assess whether you want to offer e-commerce in the future and what you might change.

Curate Your Product Line

With goals defined, you can choose products. You don't have to offer 100 choices of products to provide a

convenient service to customers and to make money with the e-commerce program. In fact, too many choices can work against you because customers can easily become overwhelmed and then just click away and you can become overwhelmed and quit. Better to choose 10 or 20 items (and that includes the variations, so if one item actually has three variations, that's actually three items) and go from there.

Establish criteria to determine the product mix. The criteria should reflect your goals. Here are some example criteria and product suggestions:

Plentiful, fairly standard supply—No special onesies or twosies. (For example, wreaths, Christmas trees, a limited choice of poinsettias, garland and things like pre-potted amaryllis gifts.)

Meet your minimum price point for e-commerce—Nothing under $25. I'd argue for nothing under $50. It cost money to fulfill e-comm orders.

Solve a problem—Such as "holiday in a box" with a garland, wreath and Christmas tree bundle, or two or three "themed" gift baskets available at $50, $75 or $100 price points.

Can be assembled in batches to be ready for fulfillment to the customer—Gift baskets, decorated wreaths, pre-planted holiday bulb containers.

Contain inventory that can be held back for e-commerce in a separate location—Anything can fit this category if you do it!

Determine Services to Offer

Now that products are chosen, you can outline services that will be part of the program. And make no mistake, e-commerce is a service, and pricing should reflect that. The big one is: will you offer delivery or not? Delivery is an entirely different business model/service than a brick-and-mortar retail store. If you offer delivery, you're essentially turning into a florist. That's not a bad thing, but it's something to be aware of going in.

If you're going to offer delivery, ask yourself these questions to design your program:

• Will you allow customers to choose a delivery window or will you notify them when you'll be by?

• Does delivery cost extra or is it part of the price of the item?

• Do you have a delivery radius? Is part of the radius free and part an additional charge?

• What happens if the recipient isn't home at the time of delivery, especially if you're delivering cold-sensitive items?

Another big question is: Will you offer any kind of customization of products, such as:

• Hand-written cards

• Bow colors

• Substitutions

(For ease of service, I vote "no," on customizations except for potentially a card with a message. And if you do that, you need to put a section on the website for people to fill in a message.)

Assign Responsibility

Successful e-commerce ventures all have one thing in common: someone owns it. Somebody understands that they're accountable for ensuring a smooth operation—even if they don't actually do every step themselves. This person would be responsible for managing others who touch the process and for reporting to management about

the program on a predetermined schedule (such as weekly). Reporting should include sales, returns, costs, trends (what's popular and what's not), changes to processes and so forth.

It's vital that the owner or general manager isn't the one responsible for the e-commerce program. E-commerce is not an "add on." For a holiday shop, consider delegating to a reliable full-time spring seasonal staff person or seasonal manager with an affinity for technology and details.

Develop Processes

Clearly defined processes are essential for staff and customer happiness. Find our full article about process development in the September 2020 issue of Green Profit. A few high points of e-comm process development you won't want to skip:

• How, when and with what frequency are orders processed? (Printed from the website, picked, staged for pickup or assigned to delivery, etc.)

• What's your refund policy?

• How and when are multi-piece products assembled?

• When is physical inventory counted and the available inventory on the website reconciled?

Build Your Online Shop

Just as with processes, there are many steps to building a store. If you're not doing e-commerce at all, but are thinking of doing it for the holidays as a test run for the future, it's worth deciding if you want to add a shopping cart to your current website (for example, if you have a WordPress website, adding WooCommerce) or if you want to build your storefront on proprietary software such as Shopify, BigCommerce or Square. One course is not easier than the other; they just have different requirements and costs, but all add up to about the same effort. If you're not sure what to do, find a web strategist to help you plan. (Not a web developer—a web or digital business strategist.)

Whatever the platform, these are must-haves for your e-comm site:

• Clear, accurate, appealing photography of each product or product bundle

• Clear e-commerce-specific FAQs

• Accurate and enticing product descriptions, including size or color information for variants (Christmas tree heights could be variants; amaryllis bulb type could be a variant)

• Scheduling plug-in if you're allowing customers to schedule deliveries

• Order confirmation emails configured

• Privacy policy

• Terms of service

You can generate a privacy policy and terms of service on Termly.io. Have your lawyer review them before adding them to your website and linking them in your subfooter. (The very bottom where your copyright notice is.)

Plan & Execute Program-Specific Marketing

Is e-commerce a new venture? Is the holiday shop a new venture? Communicate with your customers about it! Plan a series of marketing emails and social media posts that explain the program—how long you're offering it, how different aspects—such as delivery—work, introduce the items, hype them up, especially the problem solvers—and

show plenty of eye-candy pictures. Make the marketing a mix of informative and inspirational, and don't forget call-to-action buttons such as learn more, buy now and so forth.

If the program is new and you don't have your own photography, use stock photography and Photoshop to combine lifestyle (a kitchen counter, a living room, a holiday table) with product-specific (blooming amaryllis) photographs into a usable image. It's amazing how realistic you can make a blooming amaryllis sitting on a table look. Just don't misrepresent what you're selling.

Don't have an email list? Here's a good excuse to start one. Tease something new and ask people to sign up to be notified! Most of all, if you want to try a holiday e-comm program, don't delay. Start now: plan, promote and execute! What are you waiting for? **GP**

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