BIGCOMMERCE

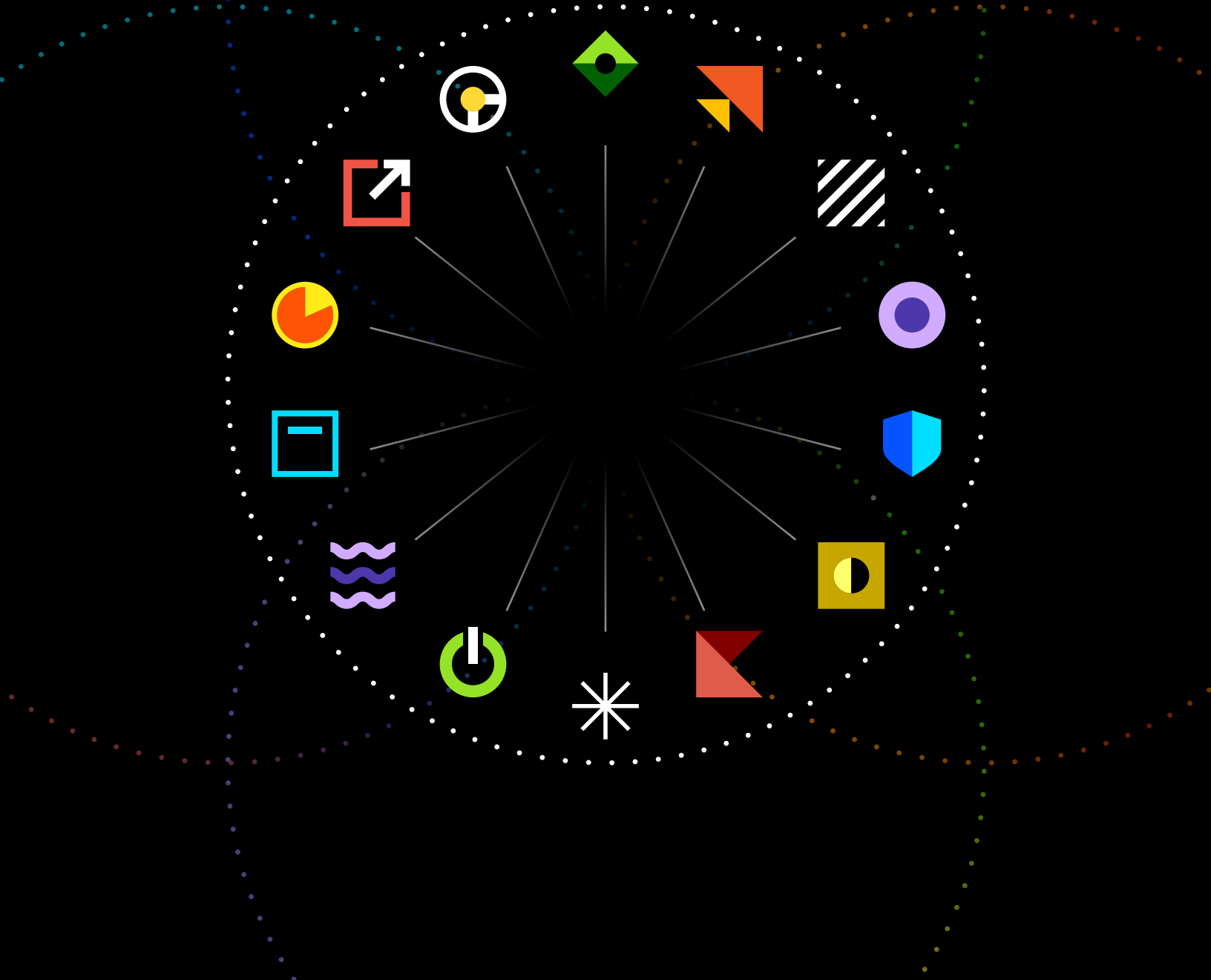# HOW TO SELL ONLINE IN 2020

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Beatriz Estay

Hello! My name is Beatriz Estay and I am the Small Business Content Marketing Specialist at BigCommerce. From the early stages of my career, I've had a passion for ecommerce — specifically, developing and executing strategies to succeed online. Over the years, I have become highly skilled in digital commerce, marketing, branding, and merchandising strategies.

From living around the world to working in ecommerce to watching my own family members launch brands of their own, I've learned the secrets to building, managing, and scaling online businesses. As we enter a new decade, I decided it was time to create the ultimate guide for both aspiring and established entrepreneurs looking to dominate the ecommerce space.

When I'm not curating content for small businesses, I focus my time on my influencer side hustle — my blog,

The Letter Bea. Partnering with growing brands has given me the opportunity to learn more about what makes their businesses unique and creatively brainstorm how I can contribute to their growing narrative. On my platform, you can often find me sharing my personal journey with Type 1 Diabetes, sharing the latest fashion trends, and scouting Austin's most Instagram friendly spots.
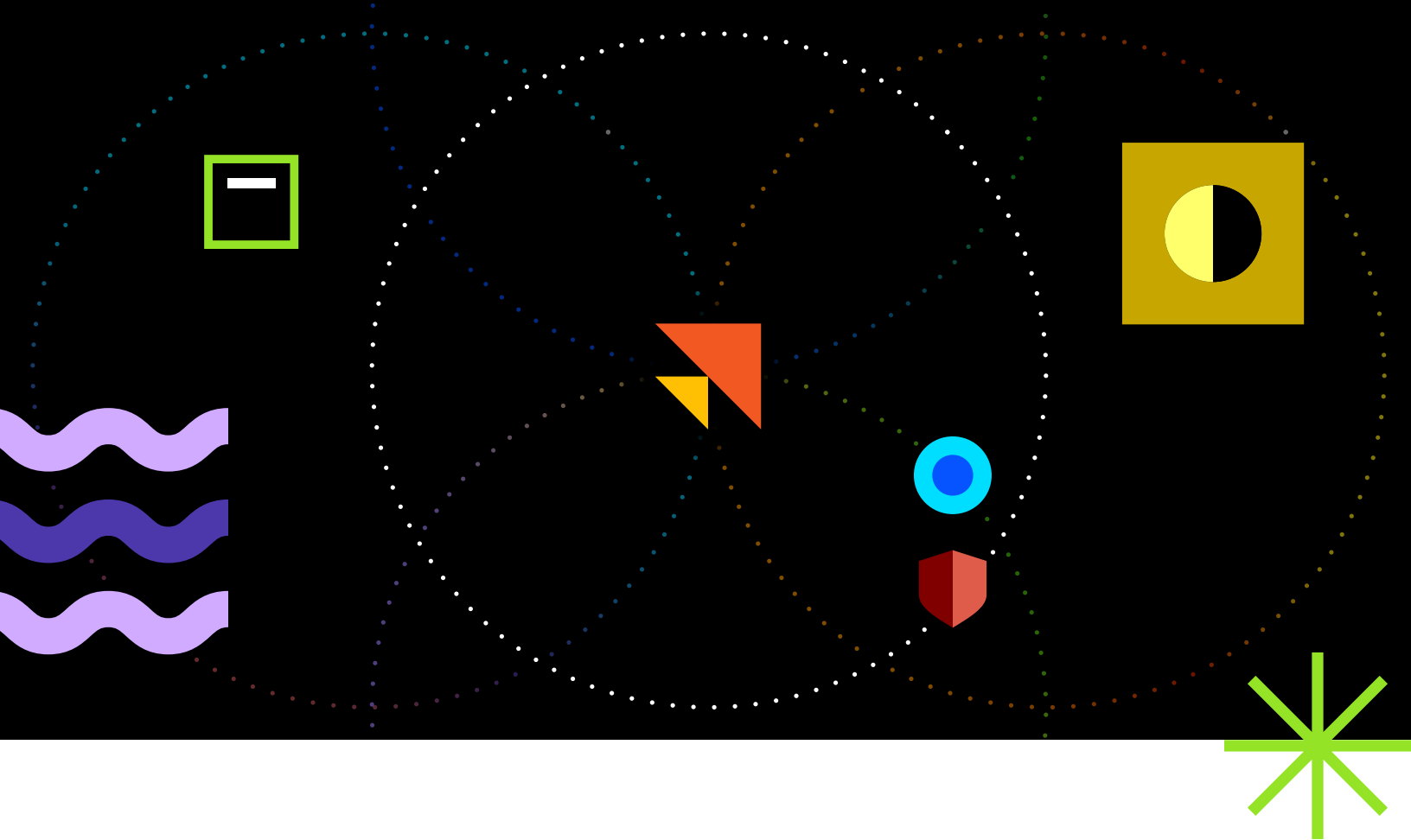
Introduction

Finding online business success is not easy.

From choosing a product to sell to growing your online presence, there's a lot to consider.

Add in an overwhelming amount of ecommerce options - from platforms to API integrations - and your head may be spinning.

At BigCommerce, we understand the dedication, hard work, and diligence it takes to create, manage, and scale a successful online business.

We go beyond the basics of ecommerce software and aim to help merchants, around the world, find success in the ecommerce space. That includes how to find a product to sell to abiding by business laws to getting creative with digital marketing strategies.

That's why we've created the ultimate guide to walk you through, step-by-step, the components of selling online and how to create an actionable strategy for each stage.

Without further ado, let's dive in.

How to Craft
The Best Product
and Brand
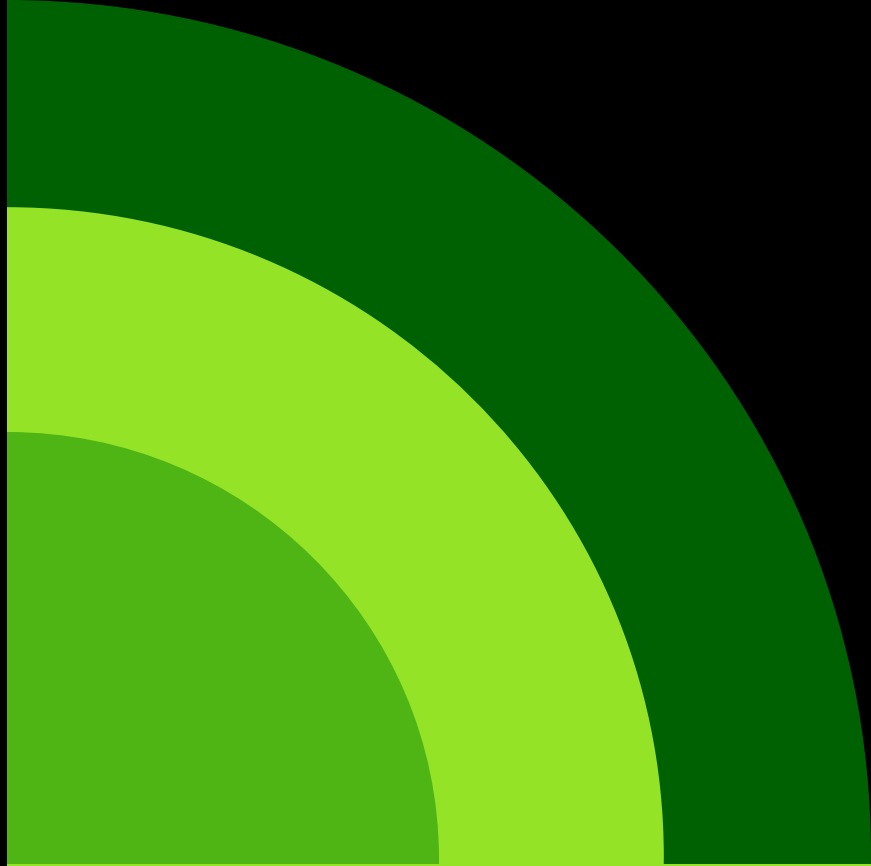
Chapter 1: How to Craft The Best Product and Brand

No matter how long you've been an entrepreneur, launching an online business has never been more difficult. Here's a quick look at the 2020 online landscape:
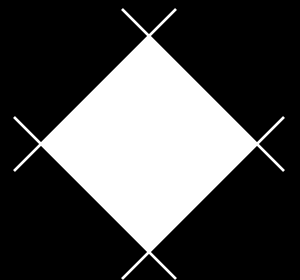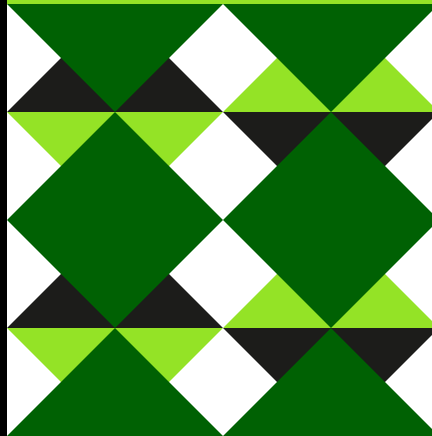
- Competition is fierce

- Product markets are saturated

- Consumers are demanding convenience more than ever before

Before you begin to brainstorm the design and experience of an online store, or even your company's name, you'll need to choose what products to sell.

This decision is a strategy within itself, as what you sell will impact every other business decision you make, such as:

- Brand name

- Website design

- Marketing

- Loyalty programs

- Shipping and fulfillment

While each of these components is essential to a successful online strategy, they are worthless without a great product to support them.

Let's dive into how to find the perfect product to sell online.

What Type of Products Can I Sell Online?

Regardless of which industry you are in, there are two types of products you can sell:

1. Commoditized products

2. Niche products
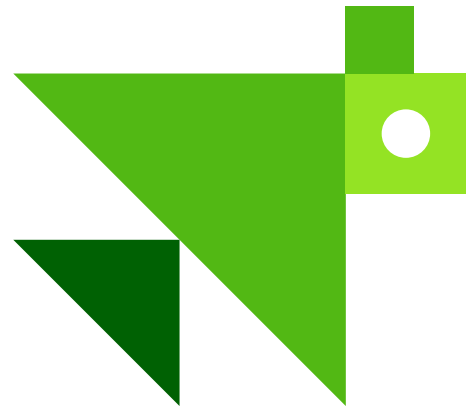
Commoditized products are essential, high demand, or popular goods or services that can be physical or digital products. These are products that everybody needs.

Commoditized products are what make up the majority of online sales. Think of anything you buy at Walmart or Amazon that has a big brand behind it — food, golf clubs, clothes, kids toys, etc.

Niche products are goods or services that serve a specific customer base and product category.

In many instances, these are unique, one-of-a-kind, or handmade products, making them some of the most popular items bought online.

Niche products are often made in small batch runs or on demand. Think of a unique beaded necklace, handmade frozen yogurt, or leather iPad case.

However, many store owners sell a combination of commoditized products and niche products to increase their profit margin.

Offering only commoditized items, especially if they are popular products sold on major online marketplaces like Amazon, will make it extremely difficult to become successful.

Larger online retailers and marketplaces can buy items in large quantities, which makes for more profitable products. But, chances are your startup won't be able to compete right off the bat.

Instead, offer commoditized and niche products to your customers while delivering an on-brand experience to set your online shop up for success.
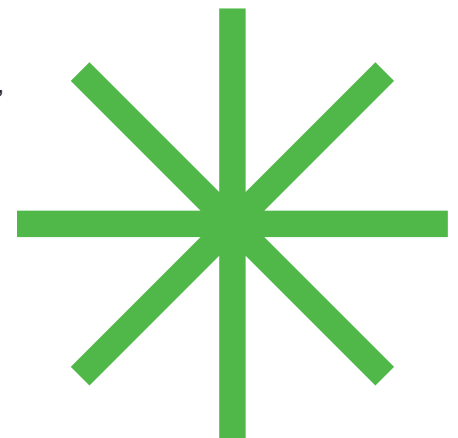
Take a look at **Tyler's**, for example.

Tyler's dives into the best of both worlds by selling niche clothing and accessories in addition to commodity apparel products from popular brands like Billabong, Simply Southern, and Yeti.
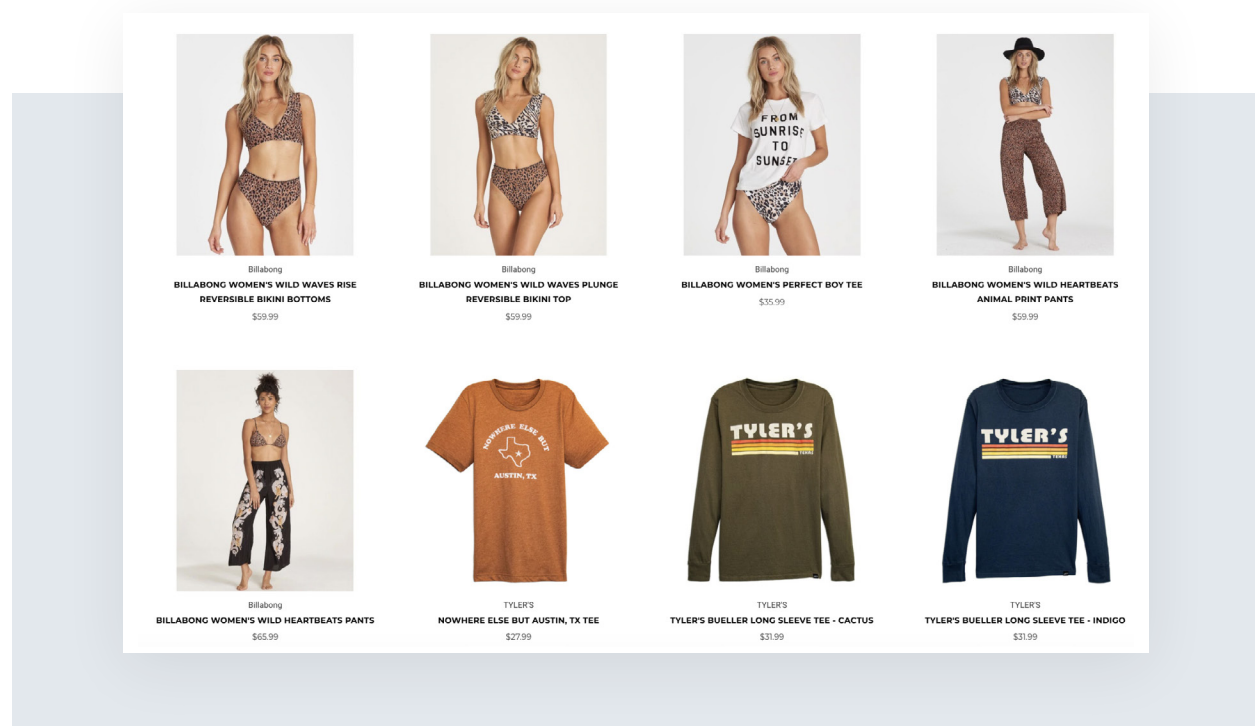
By offering both niche and commodity products, they are able to better serve their customers by making their online store a convenient choice for consumers looking for a single store to buy both types of products.

How To Choose What Products To Sell

We're all looking to become the next big company — similar to some of the most popular D2C brands today. But, truth is, in today's saturated product market, it's difficult to generate product ideas.

Lucky for you, we've compiled a product brainstorm checklist to help you unlock your entrepreneurial spirit and drive.

01 Identify or create products that solve a problem.

> " If we tried to think of a good idea, we wouldn't have been able to think of a good idea. You just have to find a solution for a problem in your own life."
>
> — BRIAN CHESKY, CO-FOUNDER OF AIRBNB

When you're brainstorming ideas for a product or service, it's essential you reflect on problems in your own life.

For Kyle Kirkpatricki, an Olympic gymnastics coach, it was wanting to listen to music while training athletes. The caveat? Being able to use headphones that would stay in place, regardless of whether he was running or jumping on the trampoline performing flips.

Spoiler alert: Kirkpatricki successfully took what used to be a small annoyance and transformed it into a brilliant business idea — the invention of **Decibullz**.

The reason behind his success? Pinpointing a problem and conveniently solving it.

Your product or service doesn't necessarily need to be a huge, complicated endeavor — it can be quite simple, yet exceptionally effective.

Product opportunities can also exist in a few other areas:

- ◢ Improved product features
- ◢ A new market unrealized by your competitors
- ◢ Unique product positioning and marketing
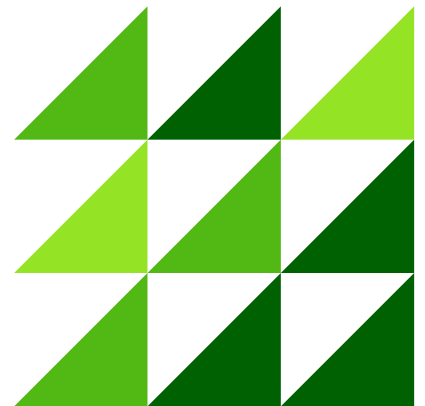
Beauty and skincare brand **Bliss** took a trending product, improved its features while tapping into an unrealized market opportunity, and introduced it to the market with unique positioning.

Bliss, founded in 1996, began its business as a modern spa in NYC. They sought out to revolutionize skincare by introducing ingenious products to the market and cultivating a sense of community with their customers.

Fast forward to 2020, with the help of new technologies and global ingredients, Bliss continues to introduce new PETA-certified, cruelty-free, clean beauty and skincare products that work for every budget.
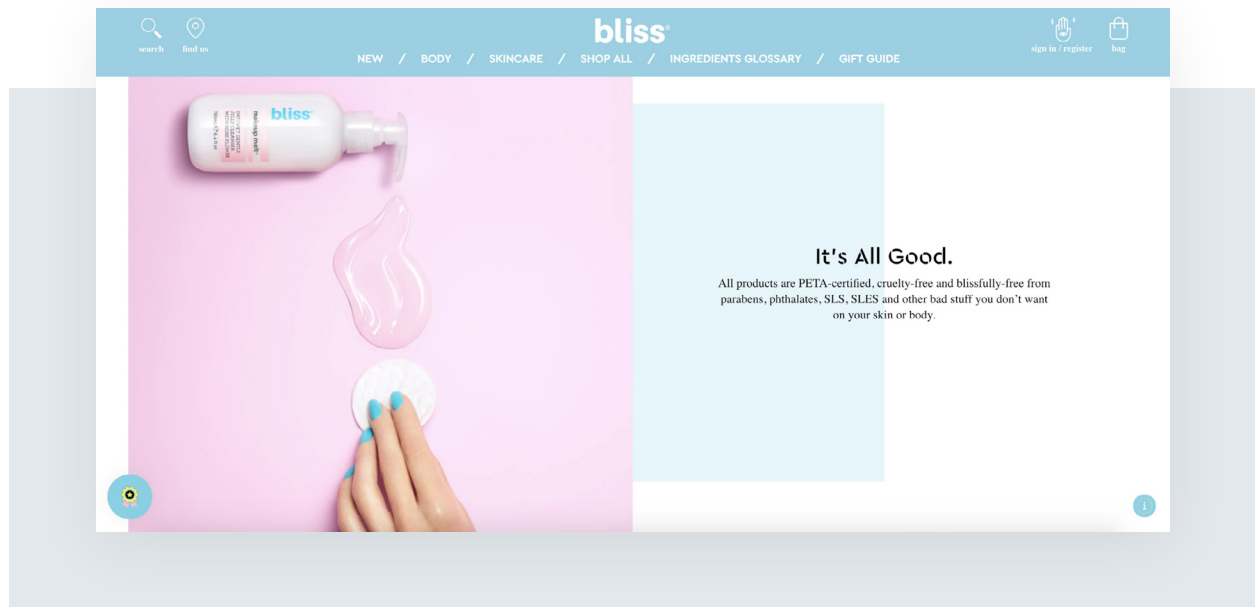
"We want everyone to put their best face forward." — Bliss

By founding your brainstorm in the eyes of a consumer, you will be able to identify ways a product or service can bring value to someone's life.

PRO TIP:
REFLECT ON YOUR OWN LIFE AND OUTLINE WHAT
EXPERIENCES PUT A HITCH IN YOUR GIDDYUP.

02 Find products you and other people are passionate about.

'Passionate' might be a buzzword, but it carries a lot of value.

Starting your own business is not the glitz and glam that's shown in the movies. The reality looks a lot more like long hours, likely some rocky terrain, and the occasional, if not frequent, sacrifice.

Being passionate about what you do will not only help carry you through hard times, but it will also

aid in crafting a brand message that speaks to people in a way that is meaningful, authentic, and engaging.

Let's be real — without passion, what's the driver behind your online business?

By emotionally investing in your product, you can better deliver its value and mission into the market. Plus, an emotional story will help you stand out to competitors.

03 Find products with branding potential.

You've identified a potential product that solves consumers' problems and comes from a place of passion. So, what's next? Creating a resounding brand message and can make a splash in the competitive ecommerce space.

Crafting a recognizable and memorable brand means you'll need to put in the time to research and truly understand your target audience.

Your brand should speak to your potential customers in a way that both resonates and compels them to come back.

In other words, you want to build loyalty based on audience identity.

Some great questions to start with here are:

- How does your target audience like to be addressed?

- How will you position your product?

- How will you design your website to communicate your brand and appeal to your potential customers through layout, color scheme, and calls to action?

When it comes to crafting a brand and experience that resonates, Jeff and Spencer Jan of **Solo Stove** are experts.

Solo Stove has found success from focusing on the benefit their product brings to the market — the opportunity for consumers to make memories with their loved ones. By centralizing on this theme, the company was able to exponentially grow an organic following of loyal customers. Solo Stove has been able to leverage its community of loyal customers to improve their brand, product, and online experience with authentic product reviews, community engagement, and honest feedback.
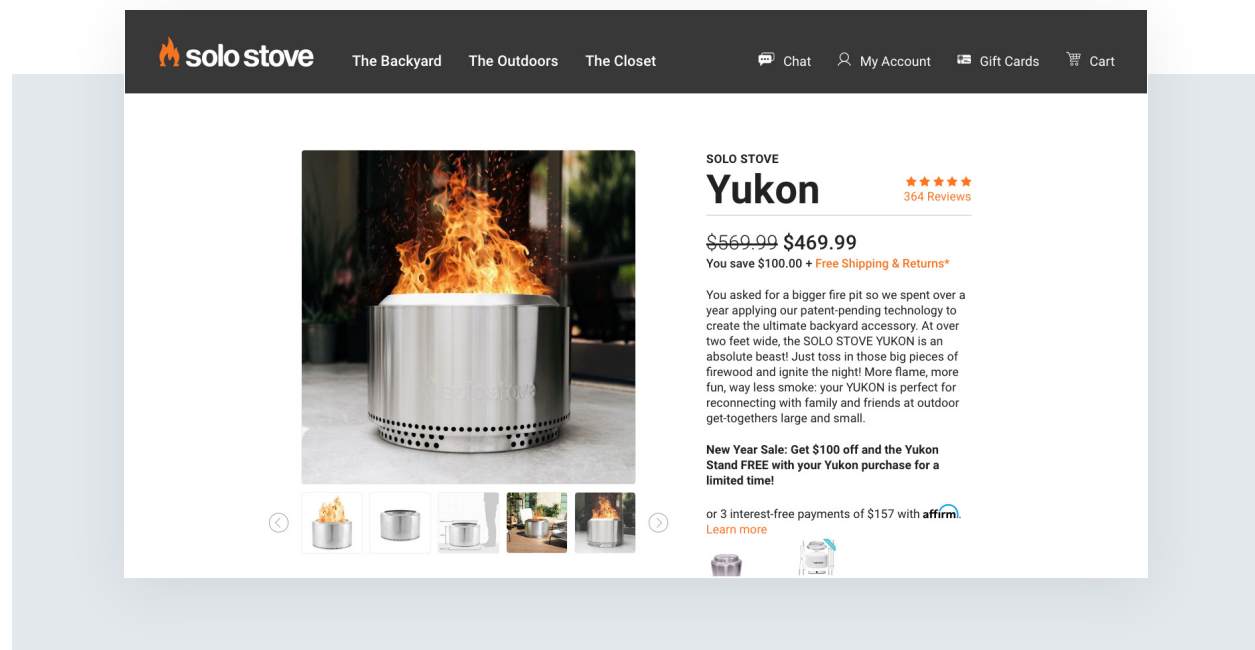
> **Solo Stove is focused on helping people reconnect to what matters most, and BigCommerce has helped us take that to the next level."**
>
> — JOHN MERRIS, CEO AT SOLO STOVE

Leveraging your product to create community and purpose is a crucial component to growing your online store. Without a product and brand your customers can relate to, you're essentially running your business on an empty tank.

04 Hop on trends early.

Take advantage of an emerging market and carve out a spot for your brand.

To be successful in doing so, it's pivotal that you stay up-to-date on recent, trending products and services — and then launch an ecommerce site to capitalize on them before they hit peak popularity.

As a small business owner, hopping on trends early can give your business a huge upside. You'll have the opportunity to own SEO keywords and establish yourself as a leader within the market you serve early on.

Start thinking of products or services that have been trending up in recent years.

05 Find products that fulfill guilty pleasures.

It always comes back to what we're passionate about. Another proven successful product is one that caters to customers' passions, or even their vices.

Shoppers often spend more on their guilty pleasures, developing deep loyalty to brands that understand their obsessions.

From its early beginnings, Jeni's Ice Cream sought to capture this emotion with their customer base.

Jeni's knows ice cream is a real treat, which is why they make their products with fresh ingredients. This way, customers can feel good about indulging every now and then (and their extensive flavor options keep customers coming back for more).

06 Identify and serve niche segments.

Niche segments often spell out success for ecommerce businesses.

The reason for niche segments comes down to resonating with a highly-engaged, and highly-converting, audience. Serving a niche segment is a great business proposition because you create a product that solves an issue for a very passionate audience segment.

Serving a passionate niche audience will help build brand awareness, online traffic and, ultimately, new and returning converting customers.

Let's take a look at LARQ.

LARQ is a water bottle unlike anything else on the market.

What started as a simple vision of bridging the gap between innovative technology and better access to pristine drinking water resulted in the world's first self-cleaning water bottle.

The product serves as an easier, healthier, and more sustainable choice thanks to UV-C LED technology that eradicates up to 99.99% of germs, bacteria, and protozoa, eliminating harmful and odor-causing sources. And if that wasn't already great, it also comes in a chic and sleek modern design, in various colors.

The brand continues to cater to its niche segment by supporting other environmental causes. For example, LARQ is a proud member of 1% For The Planet, which means 1% of all of their sales goes to protecting the future of our planet.

Here are 10 ideas for niche products to sell online in 2020:

1. On-the-go, health-conscious foods

2. Craft beverages (mocktails included)

3. Subscription boxes

4. CBD products

5. Men's engagement rings and wedding bands

6. Journal notebooks and personal planners

7. Pet food

8. Cruelty-free beauty products

9. Camera and photo accessories (e.g. drones and tripods)

10. Shapewear

07 Spot business opportunities absolutely everywhere.

Part of being an entrepreneur is always pushing your imagination.

As you do your part as a world citizen, pay attention to how society behaves. Are there norms to be broken? Is there an opportunity to improve the lives of your neighbors?

What products gain quick customer acquisition? What industries are gaining traction?

Keeping up to date with what's going on in the world will help you identify new online business opportunities.

In addition, sit down and evaluate your strengths and interests.

Are you a naturally gifted marketer? Does the idea of fundraising make you cringe?

Gather the resources, both human and technical, to bring your online business to life. Having an organized approach to a product and business launch will only bode well in the future.

How Do I Begin Selling Online?

You've got a product and now you're ready to go to market — online.

Before you begin setting up an online store, be sure to have these steps completed:

1. Do market research

2. Finalize products to sell

3. Identify your customer base — and segment your audiences

4. Begin research on what ecommerce platform you'd like to sell on (like your own online store, Amazon, eBay, Facebook, and other sites customers commonly buy from)

5. Create high-quality product content (including product descriptions and imagery)

6. Create a strategy to market to your potential customers (so you can drive traffic to store)

Truth is, launching an ecommerce store is not a walk in the park. But, with the right tools and an organized pre- and post-launch plan, you'll be on the right track toward success.

In this guide, you'll learn how to build an online business set up for success.

Resources To Help You Start Selling Online

❝ **If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail."**
— BENJAMIN FRANKLIN

Before we dive into each detailed chapter, we've compiled a list of resources to help you prepare for your new online business venture.

Each of the articles in these sections will walk you through how to set yourself up for long-term online selling success.

RESOURCES FOR THE PLANNING PHASE.

Below are resources to help you plan out your ecommerce store. These are great for understanding your options when choosing an ecommerce website builder, website design inspiration, and ideas for products to sell.

- Do Ecommerce Niches Really Lead To Riches? How To Identify Overlooked Product Opportunities To Increase Revenue

- BigCommerce vs Shopify: The Clash of The E-Commerce Titans. Who Will Win? (Digital.com)

- Best Ecommerce Websites For Design Inspiration: 22 Award-Winning Examples (2019)

- Need Ecommerce Business Ideas? 27 Experts Give You Their Best Online Store Opportunities For 2019

- 26 Top Trending Products to Sell Online At Your Ecommerce & Dropshipping Store in 2019 (Cloudways)

- Top Ecommerce Niches of 2019 (Ecomdash)

SUCCESSFUL ECOMMERCE BUSINESS BASICS.

Sometimes, you just have to bring it back to the basics. Explore these resources to learn more on how to successfully manage and run your online business.

- How to Master Product Photography on a Tight Budget (We Did it With Less Than $50)

- How to Write a Returns and Exchanges Policy That Grows Sales

- The Complete Guide to Writing Product Copy That Sells Itself

- 27 Experts Give You Ideas For Ecommerce Businesses

DESIGNING YOUR STORE.

Ecommerce store designs goes much further than an eye-catching design. Learn what features and functionality you need to meet your customers' expectations.

- 22 Ecommerce Sites For Awesome Website Design Inspiration

- Get Inspiration From Innovative Ecommerce Brands

- Ecommerce Store Inspiration: Designs We Love + Sites With Awesome Functionality

- Your Guide To Ecommerce Themes: How To Choose The Right Design For Your Online Store

RESOURCES FOR OPTIMIZING YOUR STORE.

Once you have your design ready to go, it's time to focus on product photography, website copy, CTAs, and more. Check out these articles to learn how you can best optimize your online store.

- How to Master Product Photography on a Tight Budget (We Did it With Less Than $50)

- The Complete Guide to Writing Product Copy That Sells Itself

- How to Create Ecommerce Product Videos That Drive Traffic

- 17 Best Ecommerce Product Video Examples

ACCEPTING PAYMENTS.

Conversion is the goal, which means you need to master your checkout. Explore these resources to learn more about what payments you should accept and why.

- How To Accept Credit Card Payments Online in 2019: What Are Your Best Options?

- Payment Gateways: Keeping Your Ecommerce Transactions Safe + Customers Happy (2019)

- These Brands Make It Big By Using Amazon Pay (Benefits + Examples)

- 7 Ecommerce Merchants Discuss Apple Pay's Growing Benefits (2019)

- 6 Surprising Ways Accepting Mobile Payments Helps Businesses (Square)

- 8 Things to Know About Payment Security (PNC)

PROTECTING CUSTOMER DATA.

- Everything You Need to Know About PCI Compliance and How to Achieve It

- What is ISO Certification? ISO Meaning and BigCommerce's ISO 27001 Achievement

Returns + shipping and fulfillment resources.

Let's talk post-conversion. How do you manage your returns, shipping, and fulfillment? It's key to meet your customers expectations post-purchase so they'll continue shopping with your brand in the future.

Whether it be small business shipping, dropshipping, or fulfillment centers, you can count on us to help you find what works best for your business.

◢ How to Write a Returns and Exchanges Policy That Grows Sales

◢ Next Steps After The Sale: Your Guide to Small Business Shipping

◢ Calculating Ecommerce Shipping Costs: Rates & Fees

◢ Shipping Sales Tax in 2019: Taxability Examples, Laws & More

◢ Ecommerce Fulfillment: 3 Strategies To Fulfill Online Orders (2019)

◢ Ecommerce Shipping: Strategies, Solutions & Best Practices (Advanced)

◢ Ecommerce Warehousing 101: Best Practices + Checklist (2019)

◢ Dropshipping in 2019: Does It Actually Work? (Pros + Cons)

◢ Startup Fulfillment Services by ShipBob

Make your first sale.

Once you have your site set up for success, it's time to start driving traffic and converting visitors into customers. Here's everything you need to increase your brand's visibility and stay top of mind with customers.

DRIVING TRAFFIC.

In order to generate sales, you'll need to drive traffic - to all the channels you participate in. Use these resources to create a strategy around online traffic.

◢ 30 Ways to Drive Traffic to Your Ecommerce Store

◢ How to Create Ecommerce Product Videos That Drive Traffic

◢ Ecommerce SEO Guide: How Online Stores Can Drive Organic Traffic in 2019

CONVERTING SHOPPERS.

Your customers are now on your site. What type of experience do you give them? What makes them want to engage in business with you? Take note from these articles and think about how you can apply your learning to your business.

◢ How to Use Psychology and Sales Triggers to Double Your Conversion Rate

◢ The Science of Emotional Buying and What Marketers Can Do About It

◢ How to Remove Friction From Your Buyer Journey

- ◢ [3 Ways to Use Customer Data Right Now to Increase Conversions](#)

- ◢ [31 Email Marketing Tips to 5x Conversion](#)

- ◢ [6 Ideas for Landing Pages](#)

RETAINING CUSTOMERS WITH MARKETING.

Marketing is key to customer retention. This means you'll need to spend time getting to know your customers and what they value.

- ◢ [How to Set Up an Ecommerce Loyalty Program](#)

- ◢ [We Spent a Year Building an Ecommerce Email Automation Platform: Here's What We Learned](#)

- ◢ [The 3 Phases of Ecommerce Personalization](#)

MEASURING SUCCESS.

Success is nothing without the evidence to back it up. Think about how you will track your growth by exploring these articles.

- ◢ [55 Ecommerce Metrics and KPIs You Need to Measure to Drive 10x Growth](#)

- ◢ [Why Conversion Rate is the One Metric That Determines Your Success](#)

Sell everywhere.

The fastest growing businesses on the BigCommerce platform view themselves similarly to a stock portfolio, and they have found that diversification is key to success.

Smart brands have multiple revenue streams to supplement their ecommerce website. Better yet, modern consumers are agnostic to their final purchase destination.

This means that a customer has no preference on whether they shop on Amazon or your ecommerce store.

A consumer's only preference is convenience.

Simply put — if you aren't selling across channels, you could lose the sale to a competitor who has better diversified.

Here's all the information you need to know to expand your revenue portfolio and grow your sales by 10x.

SELLING ON AMAZON.

Yes, the 'A' word. Discover how you can use the online marketplace powerhouse to grow your business.

- ◢ **The Definitive Guide to Selling on Amazon**

- ◢ **Sell on Amazon from BigCommerce's Central Control Panel**

SELLING ON EBAY.

Another great online marketplace, but with different tactics. Discover how you can take your brand to the next level with eBay.

- ◢ **The Complete Guide to Selling on eBay & Scaling to $1,200+ in Monthly Sales**

- ◢ **How Selling on eBay Can Future-Proof Your Business**

- ◢ **Sell to 165,000,000 Potential Customers on eBay**

SELLING ON GOOGLE.

Most of us know Google for its search power, but have you ever thought about selling on the platform? Read the articles below for everything you need to know.

- ◢ **Create a Profitable Google Shopping Campaign**

SELLING ON FACEBOOK.

Facebook is essential to omnichannel strategy. Between the marketing and sales benefits, you'll want to learn how you can leverage its power for the success of your brand.

- ◢ **The Complete Guide to Advertising on Facebook**

- ◢ **Sell Seamlessly on Facebook with One-Click**

SELLING ON PINTEREST.

Do you have high quality product photography that's eye-catching? Then Pinterest may be a great omnichannel solution for your business.

- ◢ **How to Grow an Engaged, Ready-to-Buy Community on Pinterest**

- ◢ **Sell on Pinterest Across Devices**

SELLING ON TWITTER.

Learn how to master the art of selling on Twitter with a complete guide.

- ◢ **The Complete Ecommerce Guide to Twitter Advertising**

SELLING ON INSTAGRAM.

With photo, video, and user-generated content opportunities, Instagram serves as a great platform to drive traffic and conversions. Dive into these resources to learn how to optimize your Instagram strategy.

- ◢ **How Your Business Can Make Money Selling on Instagram**

- ◢ **Shopping on Instagram Results Are In: Brands Report +1,416% Traffic, +20% Revenue**

- ◢ **Instagram Influencer Marketing: The Organic Superfood You Need To Fuel Your Ecommerce Store**

What's Next?

Ideas are great, but it's the execution that makes all the difference.

The rest of the guide will unlock key strategies and tactics to bring your business online.

It is now time to finalize the products you are going to sell, launch your online store and start driving traffic to your website.

Evaluate Market Viability for Your Products

Chapter 2: Evaluate Market Viability for Your Products

After you determine your products' viability, you should be able to answer these two questions:

- ◢ Can my business produce profit with this product?

- ◢ Can I ultimately scale my business with this product?

You could conduct formal research with tools like concept testing, prototype testing, market testing and focus groups to find the answers to these questions. However, taking this approach can be complex, expensive and time-consuming.

To make it easier (+ save you time), we've compiled a list of things to consider when determining if there's a commercial market for your product.

Things to Consider During a Product Viability Analysis

To start, you'll need to ask yourself some serious strategic questions about your product's viability.

- ◢ Is the product idea practical?

- ◢ What obstacles or challenges lie ahead?

- ◢ Will it need support services of some kind to ensure customer satisfaction?

After answering these questions, you'll need to shift your focus to the more tactical aspects of your product and how it will impact your business model.

01 Consider product size and weight.

The size and weight of your product will have an impact on how much you sell.

If the product you're considering is large, awkwardly shaped or heavy, you may have high shipping costs. To add to the complexity, UPS & FedEx prices fluctuate, which could negatively impact your budget.

Think you can pass the cost of shipping on to your customers? Think again.

Shipping cost is a top reason for cart abandonment.

If you can provide your customers with free, fast shipping, you significantly increase your chances of winning their loyalty.

That being said, free shipping is tightening profit margins across all industries, making it harder to stay competitive and offer a leading customer experience. By having a smaller product, you can minimize shipping costs and satisfy your customers' desire for quick and easy delivery.

02 Consider product fragility.

Fragile products need extra attention when shipping to ensure they arrive in perfect condition.

Typically, durable products cost less to ship and lighten your customer service and reparation burden for products that break en route to the consumer.

Bonus? They also usually cost less to store.

Fragility shouldn't completely dissuade you from offering a certain product, but keep in mind that opting to sell fragile goods will increase costs for shipping, inventory and customer service.

03 Consider SKUs.

Many entrepreneurs forget that a single item can often be associated with multiple SKUs.

A SKU, or stock keeping unit, typically refers to color, size and other variations of a single product.

The more SKUs you have, the more attention, time and money you will need to spend in tracking and maintaining inventory.

Let's look at how a t-shirt breaks down in SKUs to get a good idea of the process.

BCLOGO-ORG-SM

Product Name   Color   Size

You'll not only need to stock a variety of sizes (small, medium, large)…

But also colors in each size (small and red, medium and red, etc.)… And perhaps even male, female and children's sizes (small, red and women's; medium, gray and children's; large, blue and men's).

SKUs can quickly add up, adding a level of complexity to how you will fulfill, manage and distribute the product.

Don't let a large amount of SKUs discourage you, but keep an eye out for additional costs and reparations associated with product mix-ups during fulfillment.

04 Consider product lifespan.

Having a consumable or disposable product is often perceived as a great choice from a business perspective because you can improve the way you earn customers' loyalty and, ultimately, build your business off of repeat sales.

Think of the grocery store model. Inventory churn is high, competition is fierce, but the location and price point generate loyalty, pulling in consumers on a weekly basis.

LOW PRICES

VS

FARM-2-TABLE
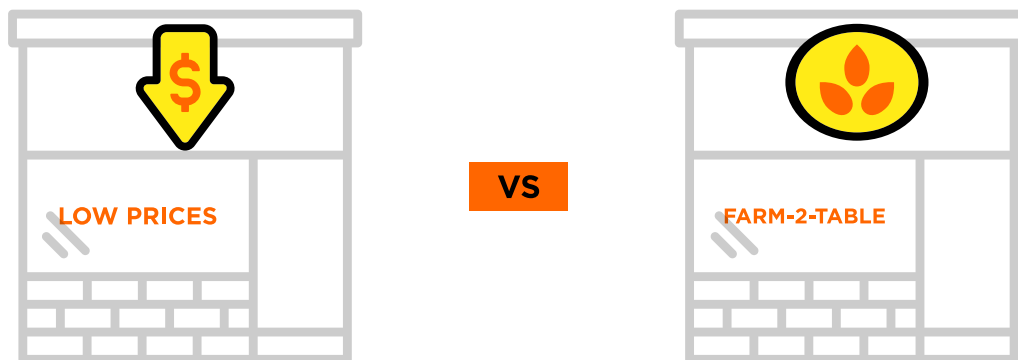
Better yet, consider the subscription box business model, in which your customer signs up for monthly deliveries and payments.

Think recurring, if possible, when considering your product offering. Overall this can help lower your marketing costs and increase your average customer lifetime value.

Now — let's talk about perishables.

There are many successful businesses out there that sell perishable products, like Jeni's Ice Cream, who serves up quality, handmade ice cream and frozen yogurt with unique flavors.

However, their road to success didn't come without challenge—like storage, shipping and production.

When offering a perishable product to the market, you'll need to set proper expectations for your customers regarding timelines and cost. By being transparent, you'll retain customer loyalty and be able to deliver a better customer experience.

With Jeni's Ice Cream delivery box, they've done just that—plus, they used a content-first approach to integrate the logistics into the overall brand messaging.

05 Consider seasonality.

Seasonality means that there are different levels of demand for a product throughout the year.

Do you buy sunscreen in winter?

How about holiday decorations in the summer?

Of course, there are different aspects to consider, including where your target customers are located (if you're selling internationally—keep in mind your winter could be their summer).

Seasonality is not an exact science. But, there are multiple ways to navigate the challenge, including running timely promotions and shipping internationally.

Whether or not you view your product as a seasonal one, seasonality does still affect revenue for all online stores. For example, some of the most highly anticipated shopping holidays—like Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, and Cyber Monday—result in some of the highest sales of the year.

To make sure you can manage a seasonal product or capitalize on holiday buzz, you'll need to determine your own business downtime, and work to off-set expectations and costs during those periods.

06 Consider price point.

Selling a product with a higher price tag doesn't prevent you from finding ecommerce success.

Let's take a look at Revelry and Natori. Both fashion brands offer luxury items that are also functional.

REVELRY

LAYLA CONVERTIBLE CHIFFON DRESS
$185.00
+ 58 colors

WYNNE CONVERTIBLE CHIFFON DRESS
$185.00
+ 58 colors

ANDREA CHIFFON DRESS
$185.00
+ 58 colors

NATORI

NATORI
Brushstroke Crepe
Crop Pants
$188.00

NATORI
Python Blouse
$248.00

NATORI
Fusion Pants
★ ★ ★ ★ ★
$98.00

NATORI
Fusion PJ
$180.00

How are these brands able to find success at a luxury level? Through their product quality and service to their customers.

If you choose to pursue a product that solves a pain point or services a passion, you'll naturally find it's much easier to acquire customers.

Remember, you'll want to make sure your prices are still attainable for your target customer. So, when you determine the market viability, keep in mind how you can maintain functionality at the forefront of quality and luxury.

07   Consider competition.

If your items are sold locally and readily available in major retail stores like Target, WalMart, Amazon or other online outlets, your ecommerce journey just became an uphill, snow-covered journey from the get-go.

That's not to say that you can't be successful selling a commonly-found item, but the more niche your products, the less competition you'll have—and the more leverage you have to win a large share of the market.

Don't let this deter you—after all, competition can be a good thing—just be sure to let it inform your market viability research.

08   Consider yourself.

Yes, on top of choosing a product that's viable in the market, you should select one that you actually enjoy yourself or one that solves a problem you have personally experienced.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this is a component of what fueled success for online brands like **Decibullz** and **LARQ**.

Building a successful business often requires long hours, and those can either fly by or drag on endlessly depending on how passionate you are about what you're selling.

Be passionate, find yourself a niche and start selling to other passionate people just like you.

How to Conduct Online Market Research
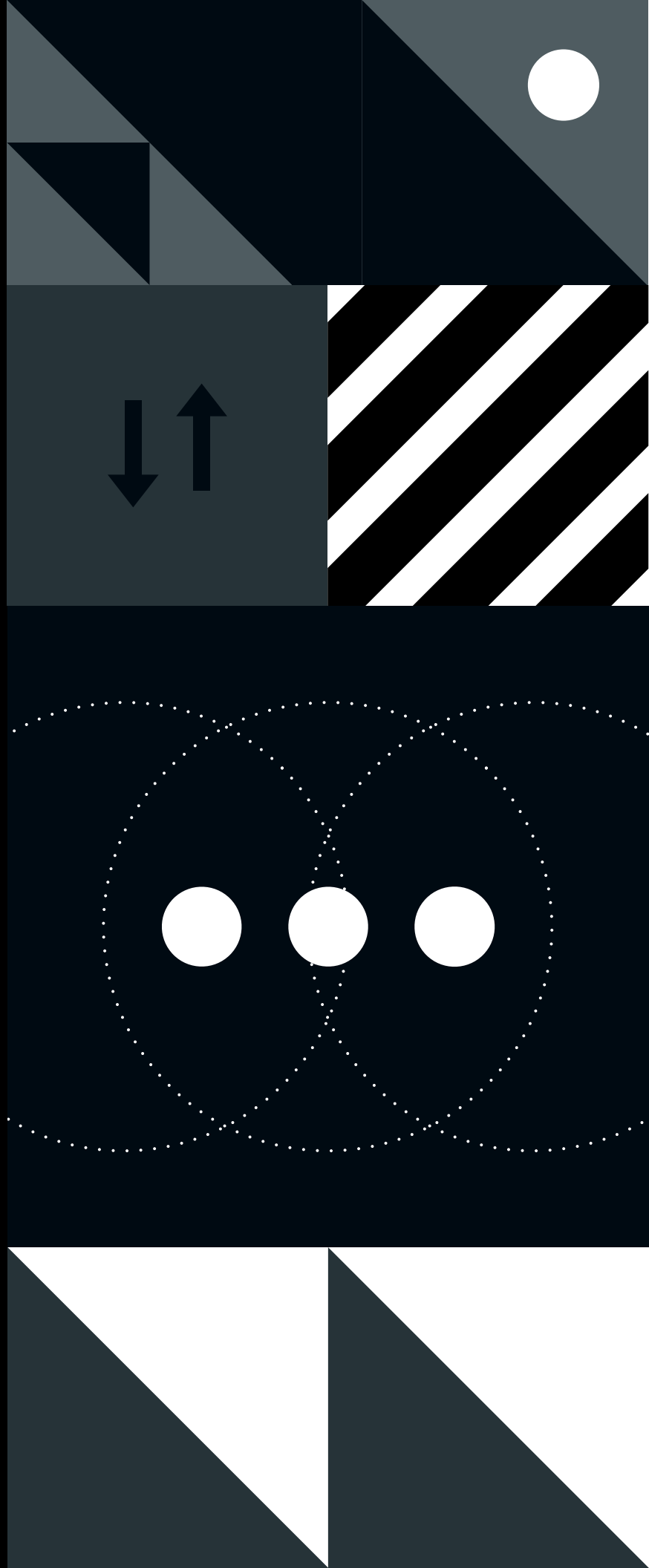
Chapter 3: How to Conduct Online Market Research

Conducting market research for your ecommerce business ideas is not only wise, it's essential.

Taking the time to go through this process will help you uncover whether or not there is a healthy demand around your business idea.

No matter how stellar you feel your idea is, you'll want to spend some serious time **evaluating market demand** and gathering hard facts before you order 2,000 product units or sign any contracts.

In this chapter, you'll learn to use your startup capital strategically.

When completing market research around your small business idea, there are several different methods you can use.

However, it's always smart to use a combination of tactics and the **best online business tools** to be certain you have an accurate picture of your market and make the best business decision possible.

01 Conduct keyword research.

Looking for a super easy, fast and free way to get a feel for your product or business demand?

The **Google Keyword Planner** helps you visualize how many people are searching for your business or product idea during any given time period.

An added bonus is that this tool will provide you with various related keywords which can help you generate ideas around which words to use in your:

- Product names,
- Descriptions,

- ◢ Blog posts, and

- ◢ Website as a whole.

Conducting keyword research will tell you what consumers are searching for all over the world.

If no one is looking for what you want to sell, that's not a good sign.

On the other hand, if thousands of searches are being done for keywords closely related to your product, you might want to take the next step sooner rather than later.

How to Use Google AdWords Keyword Planner:

1. Log in

2. Go to the keyword planner tool page

3. Use the "Search for new keywords" option

4. Type in your desired keywords, each on a different line. You can also upload a list

5. View search volume results to target a specific, relevant keyword and group

6. Browse additional keyword suggestions to find new, relevant keywords to target

Here are some of my favorite benefits of using the tool:

- ◢ Discovering keywords that have the highest search volume with the lowest competition

- ◢ Browsing additional recommended or related keywords, so you can find a whole new group of terms you can also target

Hold up, what do I mean by "target?"

These are the keywords you can pepper into your:

- ◢ Site copy

- ◢ Product page copy

- ◢ Meta titles

- ◢ Meta descriptions

- ◢ Social media copy

- ◢ And more

02 Find trends and put the big picture in perspective.

Google Trends is another cool Google tool you can use to reap market research learnings.

The added bonus of Google Trends is the ability to complete a search for a product or business idea and then view the directional search demand for that keyword throughout the past few years.

You can also compare the volume of searches between a few terms, by geographic locales, and even by how particular events affect search popularity.

This tool is especially helpful when considering a product that is tied to a newer niche. You will be able to analyze if your product niche is a fad or the start of a rising trend.

TAKE A DEEPER DIVE

This may seem obvious, but many potential entrepreneurs don't search for market data or surveys on their industry or specific business idea before launching.

By completing just a few quick searches, you can end up with a vivid picture of the market opportunity for your idea, which will help to justify or trash your proposed product.

Here are a few ecommerce and retail industry publications to check out:

- ◢ **Internet Retailer**

- ◢ **WWD**

- ◢ **Inc**

- ◢ **Entrepreneur**

- ◢ **Business Insider**

- ◢ **Harvard Business Review**

- ◢ **First Round Review**

03 Utilize social media.

Utilizing social media is a great way to start understanding the volume of conversations and mentions around your business idea.

Social media also helps uncover aspects of your target market that can inform your marketing efforts later.

By probing into all of the different social media channels out there, you'll start to identify how potential customers talk about your product or industry as a whole.

This will help you learn the language of your target customer base. The added benefit? You can leverage it later via your product descriptions, blog posts, ads, social media, and promotions.

Using the language of your target customers will help drive quality traffic to your site, build a loyal customer base, and increase conversions.

Here's what to look for on the leading social media platforms:

- Look into hashtags and what's trending overall.

- Use Instagram's search tool the same way you did Google Trends.

- Research what influencers are sharing — and what posts do well. What brands are dictating the narrative?

- Hashtag and type in your product to see how many others are using that hashtag, related hashtags, and popular images.

You'll want to use similar keywords and images on your social media accounts as well as on your webstore to engage the already active social community.

04 Build an online store and test the waters to gain momentum.

This is the big moment: dive in and open an online store.

Contrary to popular belief, you can do this long before your product or service is ever developed to start driving traffic or even to collect some pre-orders.

Shake off the nerves because a great ecommerce platform, like BigCommerce, will have this option built into its product pages. You can even add in expected release dates and schedule it to go live.

This tactic can help you gain immediate feedback from your target consumer or gauge demand for your product before manufacturing or buying inventory.

In addition to the creation of your website, you'll want to drive traffic to your store. Creating ads on Google and Facebook and spreading the news via word-of-mouth are great ways to succeed at this.

You'll be able to start attracting potential customers who can provide feedback, sign up for your mailing list, or join a waitlist to be notified when the product has launched.

PRO TIP:
THE INVESTMENT COMMUNITY IS MORE LIKELY TO GIVE MONEY TO A COMPANY THAT HAS SHOWN PROVEN MARKET DEMAND BY COLLECTING PRE-ORDERS OR SIGNUPS FROM REAL CONSUMERS.

05 Routes to Building an Audience Without a Product

This is tricky, but doable.

Leveraging an already existing audience to sell new products to is a great way to quickly scale a business, and there are various ways to do this.

LAUNCH A NARRATIVE BRAND
Narrative brands do incredibly well online.

What makes a brand narrative? Highlighting moments and experiences shared between a user and a product through content.

Narrative brand success comes from using content to drive organic traffic and engage audiences on social media platforms.

Burrow is a great example of a narrative brand.

> ❝ **It really starts with how we engage the customer and get them interested. One of the most important things is making sure we have a really strong mix of channels and tactics."**
>
> — MARK SIMMONS, EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT OF MARKETING AT BURROW

But, let's look at something a bit more realistic for businesses building from the ground up.

Spearmint Love is another brand which used a narrative long before selling any products.

Shari Lott started the Spearmint Baby Blog in 2009 after the birth of her first child.

The blog reviewed products and gave advice, eventually earning her thousands of Facebook and Instagram followers—many of whom were asking her where they could buy the goods.

Three years in, Shari decided to launch her own store, selling the items she most loved.

Today, Spearmint Love has hundreds of thousands of followers and continues to use a content-forward strategy to continue educating and engaging customers for the long haul.
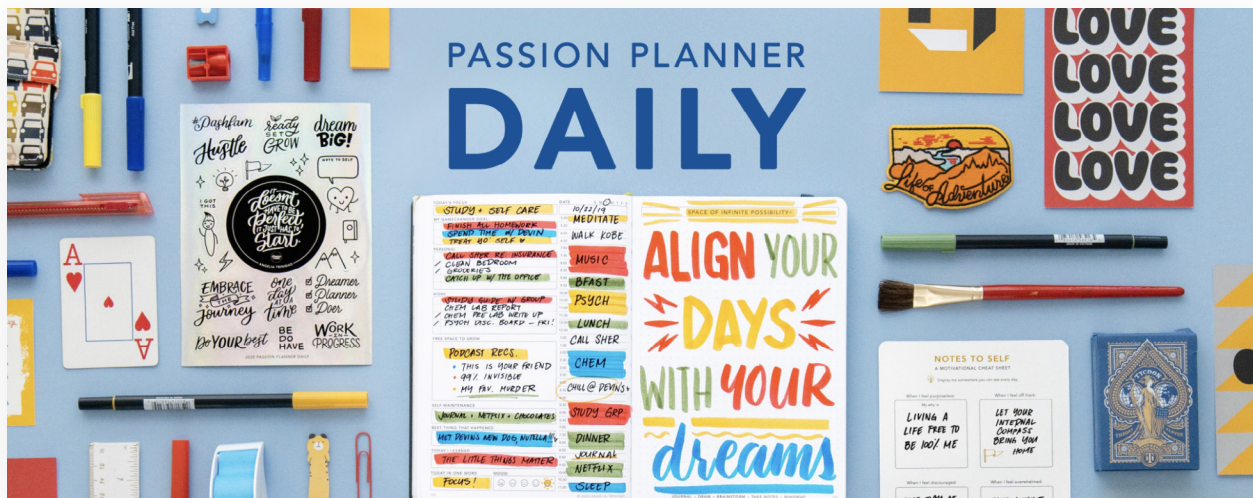
EXPLORE A CROWDFUNDING PLATFORM

Kickstarter and IndieGoGo give you the crowdfunding platform and audience to build a customer base and an email list.

The support you garner on these sites gives you a unique way to communicate to new customers - and eventually reach people who can spread word-of-mouth marketing.

Plenty of businesses have taken this route to launch, and even use it for new product launches as well.

Passion Planner does exactly that. While they have gained sales and brand awareness with their BigCommerce store, they continue to leverage Kickstarter to launch new products.

It might seem odd to use a tool like Kickstarter once you are already selling a set of products. But

there are many benefits to using a crowdfunding platform for new products:

- ◢ It can help you launch a new product and give you an indicator as to how well it will do in the market

- ◢ It gives your customers a behind-the-scenes look at what goes into bringing a product to market

- ◢ It enables your brand to engage and partner with your community of customers to spread the word

06 Leverage your digital networks and get a temperature check.

Leveraging your digital networks is a must, including your Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram followings.

These folks are all potential customers who can help gauge interest, fulfill some test orders, and offer valuable feedback at every step of the journey.

Make sure to let them know you want real, honest feedback, not that sugar-coated stuff that serves no purpose.

Here are some great forums to get honest feedback:

- **BigCommerce Community**
- **BigCommerce Facebook Community Group**

07 Scope the competition.

At this point, you'll want to take a look at your competition to get the lay of the land.

Here are a couple questions to start you off:

- Is there a clear owner of the space?
- Is the market saturated with competitors?
- Can you spot a weakness in the competition that you can take advantage of?

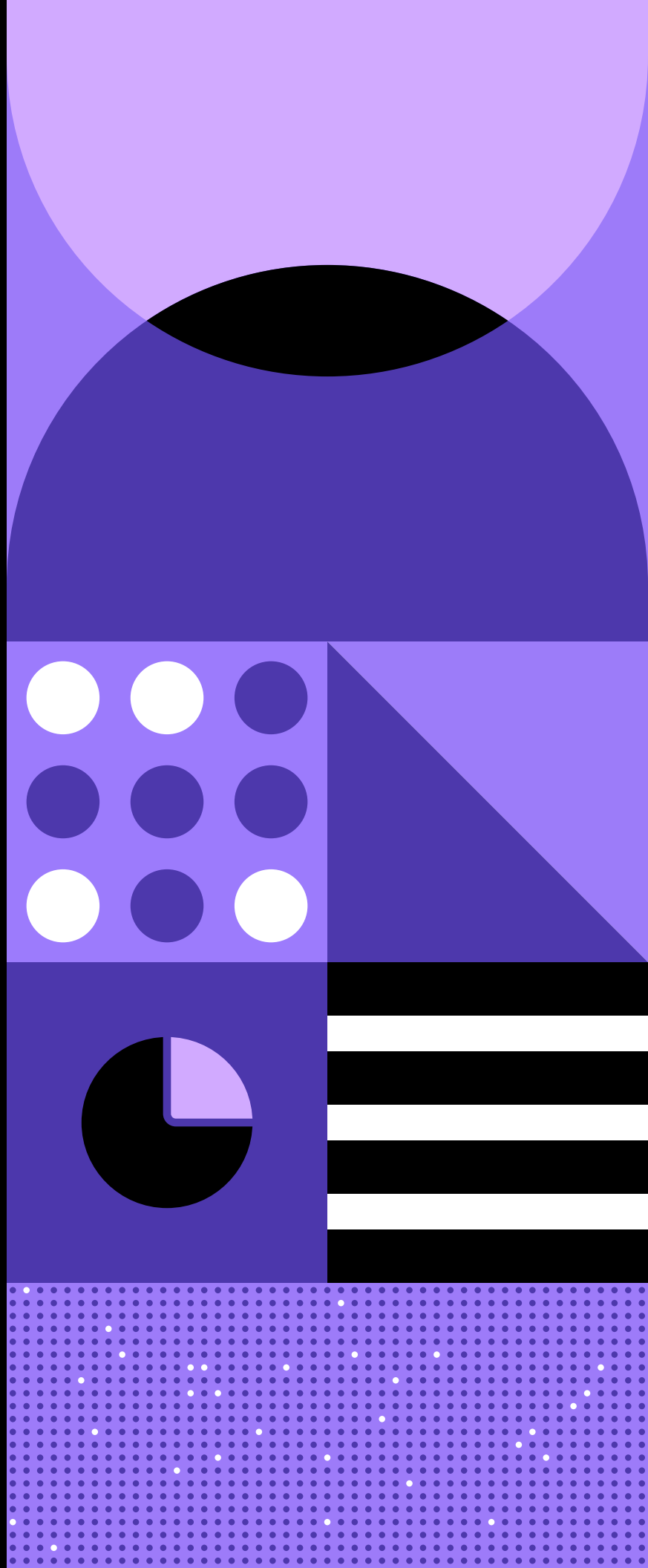Don't get discouraged if the market feels full at first glance.

That just means you'll want to take a deeper look to see if each site is actually performing well or if there is an opportunity for improvement.

Conduct a Competitive Analysis
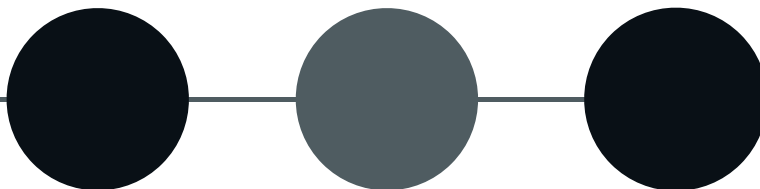
Chapter 4: Conduct a Competitive Analysis

You've heard it before - always be one step ahead of your competition.

But, how exactly do you accomplish that - especially as a newcomer to the market?

By analyzing your competition and monitoring them on an ongoing basis, you'll get to know their behavior, enabling you to anticipate their actions and stay one step ahead.

This is known as competitive analysis.

What will you gain? You will develop your differentiators and discover what will give shoppers a reason to pick your products over everyone else's.

In this chapter, you'll learn how to dissect each competitor's website and understand their overall approach, so that you can develop and sustain a competitive advantage.

Why is it Important to Research Competitors?

The research you gather about your competitors is often referred to as: "Competitive Research."

It's not a simple SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis or just knowing who's in the ring.

Competitive research is crucial to your success as a business because it arms you with the ability to quickly identify industry trends and adapt to competitor campaigns or strategies in order to maintain a foothold or out-compete them entirely.

To make sure you set your online business up for success, you'll need to do a deep dive on the current competitive landscape.

How to Conduct Your Competitive Analysis

Although performing a competitive analysis isn't rocket science, it does go beyond the few simple Google searches needed to identify your competitors.

This chapter details a simple, easy-to-use process to help you complete a competitor analysis that discovers and keep tabs on other retailers in your space. This section will delve into the crucial steps of that process.

01 Identify your competitors.

Whether you want to admit it or not, your competitors are out there and they're likely just as hungry as you are.

Afterward, you'll be able to:

- Capitalize on their **weaknesses and strengths** to help start your business

- Have a better understanding of the landscape and learn how to best position your business for success

- Identify, understand and keep tabs on your competition so you never have to worry about them sneaking up behind you

This process is known as **competitive intelligence gathering**.

FIND YOUR COMPETITORS

There are many ways to identify key competitors in your industry, but Google and Amazon will likely be where you begin your research.

Start with a simple search for your business name, product ideas and overarching business idea.

From there, explore your competitor's digital footprint by looking into:

- Content and social media

- News mentions

- Support threads and reviews

- Niche organizations and online communities

Other resources you can use to dig up information on your competitors include **Alexa**, **Keyword Spy**, **Hoovers**, **Ahrefs** and **ReferenceUSA**.

Your ultimate goal at this stage should be to cast a wide net and get a comprehensive view of the competitive landscape.

CATEGORIZE YOUR COMPETITORS

As you find competitors, you'll want to categorize them into various levels, from primary competitors to those you still need to keep on your radar — like secondary and tertiary competitors.

Here is an easy way to categorize sellers in your industry:

- ◢ **Primary Competition:** These are your direct competitors, which means they're either targeting the same audience or have a similar product — or both.

- ◢ **Secondary Competition:** These competitors may offer a high- or low-end version of your product, or sell something similar to a completely different audience. If you're selling Timex watches, a secondary competitor might be a Rolex retailer.

- ◢ **Tertiary Competition:** This category includes businesses that are tangentially related to yours, and really comes in handy when you're looking to expand your product catalog. These could be related products and services that are trending, as well as businesses that may be beneficial to partner with further down the line. For instance, if you sell jewelry, a tertiary competitor may sell gems and stones.

As you conduct your research, be sure to keep things organized in an easily accessible spreadsheet or database.

When documenting your competitors begin by tracking the basics:

- ◢ Name of store

- ◢ Location

- ◢ Mission statement

- ◢ Product offering

- ◢ Strengths and weaknesses of their business

- ◢ Category of competition

Here's a downloadable Competitive Analysis Template spreadsheet you can use to track your competitors and stay organized as you do your competitive research.

02 Examine your competitor's website & customer experience.

Once you've identified your competitors, you'll want to analyze their websites.

To start, take a close look at the following items:

- How solid is their product photography? How do they display their products and help communicate details?

- How detailed are their product descriptions? What information do they include? What information is missing?

- Where are their calls to action throughout the online shopping experience? Are they obvious or do they get lost due to a poor color scheme or positioning?

- Are they trying to build an email list with a newsletter sign-up prompt? How prominent is it?

- Where are their social media icons positioned?

- Do they have a blog? How frequently do they post? What type of information do they tackle?

- Is their site optimized for mobile?

- What methods for contact do they offer? Do they have **limited hours for phone support**?

- How long does it take them to respond to email, live chat and contact form submissions?

- Do they have an **abandoned cart saver feature**? If so, at what cadence do they send the emails and what messaging is included?

- What information is included in their marketing banners and callouts? This may help you start uncovering their competitive positioning within the market.

- How frequently are they running promotions? What benefits do those promotions provide to their customers and potential shoppers, as well as their business?

Again, these are just to get you started.

Each website will be different depending on the market they are trying to reach and the products or services they are selling.

The goal here is to not only get a handle on their strengths and weaknesses (which can also be **done with a SWOT analysis**), but to help you start thinking as a dynamic business owner.

Also use tools like **Ahrefs** to gauge the amount of organic traffic your competitors are receiving.

It may show you opportunities to optimize your site for keywords that you're currently not targeting.

From there, you'll be able to identify your competitive advantage in the marketplace.

03 Identify your competitor's market positioning.

By identifying your competitor's positioning strategy, you'll start to get a feel for your market's demands and expectations.

Take a look at their website and marketing messaging and ask the following:

- What are customers really buying from them? Are they going for price? Experience?

- How are they differentiating their product from their competition? What features and benefits do they highlight the most in their marketing copy?

- In their opinion, what makes their product or service unique?

These questions will help you understand to whom your competitors are speaking and how they position themselves within the market, which will pay dividends as you work on how you'll position yourself against or alongside them.

To gather as much information as possible, be sure to:

- **Sign up for their newsletter:** Get an understanding of their business and examples of communication, which say a lot about the competitive environment. If you're interested in looking at their emails without signing up for a newsletter, consider a competitive email marketing monitor like MailCharts.

- **Subscribe to and follow their blog:** See what types of content they are covering and at what cadence.

- **Follow them on social media:** Get a feel for how they speak to and serve their customers.

- **Purchase a product:** Check out the product itself, but also note the time it takes to ship and how their packaging looks.

- **Put an item in your cart and abandon the checkout process:** Monitor whether or not they send an abandoned cart email series and note what language and structure they use for their emails.

Take a peek at pricing.

Your **pricing strategy** is going to be one of the most important aspects of your online business — and potentially a competitive advantage.

There are several factors to consider when **setting prices for your products**.

04 The best place to start is to look at how your competitors have priced their products. You'll learn what your target market is willing to pay and get an understanding of what prices might work well for your business.

Be sure to look at their prices across a variety of channels, first Google and Amazon, as well as eBay and Alibaba (for the B2B sector).

Your prices don't necessarily have to be less than your competition.

Look at the information you gathered on market positioning and figure out what it is you're actually selling to your customers.

Your target market may be willing to pay more for peace of mind, expedited shipping or just overall website experience.

Remember to consider all the research you've been completing around general startup and business costs as we've walked through in previous posts.

You must maintain profitable margins in order to run your business. You cannot compromise in this arena.

05 **Problem solve for shipping.**

As with pricing, at this point in time, you'll just want to gather intel as to how your competition handles shipping, as well as how they communicate expectations.

Because shipping is a top reason for cart abandonment, having reasonable, competitive shipping costs is extremely important for your online store's success.

If you can't afford to set competitive shipping prices at the start, what little things can you offer or do differently to set yourself up for success? Some ideas include:

- Personalization
- Gift cards

- ◢ Giveaways on social media

- ◢ Tiered loyalty program

- ◢ Offer exceptional customer support

06 Take a temperature check with reviews.

Honesty is the best medication - and the #1 testament to customer satisfaction.

Take the time to find as many reviews of your competitors as possible, including everything from product reviews on their website to business reviews on social media to comments left on their blog.

Get a temperature check from their audience as to how healthy and client-centric their business is and decide if it's a strength or weakness you can capitalize on.

You may see an opportunity to let your customer service shine above the other players in your competitive environment."

If you find a lot of reviews on a product similar to one you'll sell, it's a good sign that people are interested in buying it.

If the reviews are from customers who aren't happy with the service provided, the condition in which the product arrived, or the product quality, those could be ways to help differentiate your business.

07 Review social media.

With social media on the rise, it's essential your business capitalizes on the opportunity to outshine your competitors on leading platforms — like Instagram and Facebook.

Looking at your competitors' social media accounts has multiple benefits.

If they have many followers, and especially if they are actively engaged, it's a good sign that there is a market for your products.

Plus, you'll get a good idea of how customers feel about their business, and see what works well and what doesn't for engaging with your own client base.

Of course, if a competitor does social really well, it also means that you'll need to step up your game and come up with a new way of engaging your market — or possibly choose a different mix of customers all together.

If your competitors don't have a decent following, it could indicate that the market is weak, your target market doesn't use social media, or simply that there is room for your business to take the lead in engaging with customers.

Take a look at all of the social media channels you can think of — including Pinterest, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Reddit and Twitter — and ask:

- What is their social media presence like overall?

- Which social media channels do they use the most?

- How do they speak with their client base?

- How often do they interact with their following?

- How frequently do they post something new?

- Which social media channels are they missing? Is there opportunity for you there?

- What are they posting?

- What percentage of the posts are about their business?

- What percentage is solely meant to increase engagement or gain followers?

Last but not least, check out some alternative social channels as well.

While digital communities are thriving, offline touchpoints also serve as great indicators of the engagement of a brand's community. If one of your competitors is hosting a local event, attend and see firsthand what customers value and support.

08 Use these bonus items and tools for competitive analysis.

- **Get the gritty details:** Want to know how long your competitors have been in business? How about the date they registered their domain, their contact information, server statistics and more? Check out **WHOis.net**.

- **See if they're hiring:** Find out what positions they're hiring for, if any. This can indicate the health of the business, plus give you a feel for the company culture.

- ◢ **Find out about funding:** Are they seeking additional funding? This can tell you how well they're doing and give you ideas on how to position yourself. Be sure to look on Crunchbase for their investment portfolio. Also, check out places like Indiegogo and Kickstarter.

- ◢ **Stay updated:** Google Alerts will send you email updates based on keywords. Setting up alerts for your competitors in addition to your own business will help you keep up with any news you need to know. Also set up alerts for industry terms to monitor new market developments that could affect your business.

Remember, regularly performing a competitive analysis doesn't mean you need to watch your competitors like a hawk or let them keep you up at night, but you should keep tabs on how their businesses are changing and watch for new challengers in your space.

The goal for your business should be to always be one step ahead. These competitive analyses will serve as a key factor when you're creating strategies to dominate the market.

With all this information, you can put together a competitive strategy that highlights your strengths — which generally align with weaknesses from your competition.

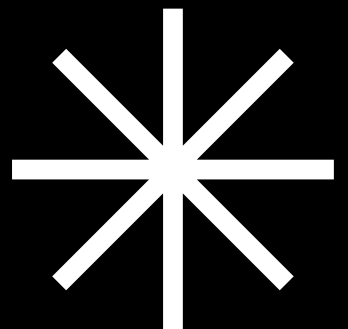Now you're one step closer to claiming market share and growing sales.

Now, let's learn how to identify your target market and begin promoting your business to potential customers.

Online Business Laws for Internet Selling
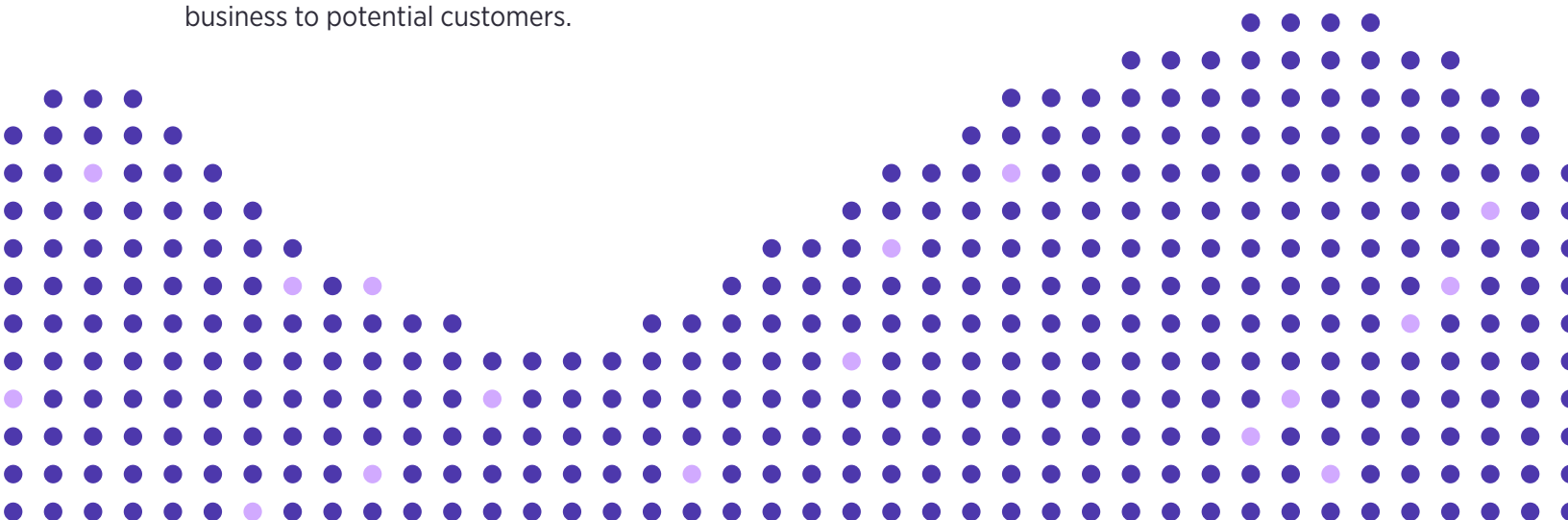
Chapter 5: Online Business Laws for Internet Selling

After you've evaluated your online store idea and have a plan for product sourcing, it's highly recommended that you research any restrictions and regulations that may affect you when opening an ecommerce store.

Understanding these issues before you try to start selling online will help you plan wisely and save you time, energy, and money.

In this chapter, we'll highlight some of the obstacles that may lie ahead for your business.

Many of these issues are just part of the cost of selling products on the internet, but some may come as a surprise.

Knowing about them ahead of time is the key to working through them.

01 Taxes.

First, know that every state and country has different expectations and standards when it comes to taxes.

That means you have to conduct some research and understand your target market.

If your store's demographic is located in the U.S., you'll likely want to display your prices exclusive of tax. However, if your target market is Australia, where shoppers are accustomed to seeing all-inclusive prices, you'll want to include tax.

Other issues are related to what you are selling and where you are selling it from.

For instance:

- If you are located in New York **and want to sell clothing**, know that clothing is taxed in your state.

- In Britain, value-added tax (VAT) applies to all non-essential goods.

- In California, items you sell in plastic bottles will carry a $0.11 recycling fee, on top of additional taxes.

To cover all your bases, talk to a tax professional or local tax authorities readily available to you.

These experts will be able to help you understand specific circumstances that may affect your product or business, give you insights on how you need to charge tax for your business's location, and help you apply for necessities like a tax ID, as well as let you know if you qualify for sales tax exemption and resale certificates.

Keep in mind, too, that this information — and the regulations around it — are constantly changing.

This is just one of the many reasons why having a **tax professional** on hand or working with your local tax authority will be an important aspect of running a healthy business. Or, you can **use an app** to automate a majority of the process.
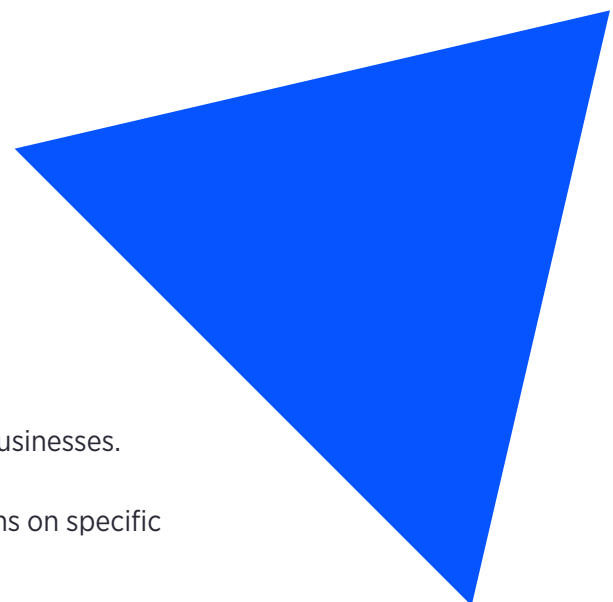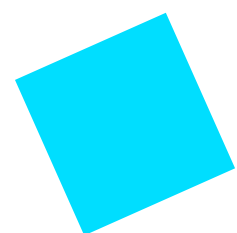
02 Payment gateways.

There are **many payment gateways available** for ecommerce businesses.

Don't feel limited by the fact that many of them have restrictions on specific products or services you may want to sell.

When you're vetting payment gateways, just be sure to ask if they have any limitations around certain products, as well as whether they are:

- Hosted or non-hosted

- Include anti-fraud features

- Require transaction fees, termination fees, monthly fees, or setup fees

BigCommerce connects with multiple payment gateways, so you have the freedom to choose the ones that are right for your business. Learn more about the most commonly used options:

PayPal ™   Square   **stripe**   **2CHECKOUT**

First Data ™   **quickbooks**   **securenet** TECHNOLOGIES

03 **Trademarks, patents, and copyrights.**

There tends to be some common misconceptions about what these word actually mean, with must-know laws and regulations around each one.

You'll want to be sure to have a clear understanding of each to prevent any unwanted legal complications.

The United States Patent and Trademark Office defines them as the following:

- **Trademark:** A word, phrase, symbol, and/or design that identifies and distinguishes the source of the goods of one party from those of others.

- **Patent:** A limited duration property right relating to an invention, granted by the United States Patent and Trademark Office in exchange for public disclosure of the invention.

- **Copyright:** Protects works of authorship, such as writings, music, and works of art that have been tangibly expressed.

Depending on what product you plan to sell, you may or may not want to apply for one of these.

Doing so isn't strictly necessary, but you should at least check to make sure you're not infringing on other patents or trademarks with your products or business.

For instance, if you want to sell t-shirts with Star Wars characters on them, you're going to run into trouble.

Simply make sure to research with the appropriate copyright, patent, and trademark organization. They'll help you start off on the right foot.

04   Shipping restrictions.

Earlier we talked about how your product will impact shipping costs and options, but at this stage in your small business, it's time to address shipping restrictions.

Spoiler alert: Not all shippers restrict the same items, so you should have options — just do a little research to see if there's a provider that will take on your product.

Most shipping companies clearly note their restricted items. Typically, restrictions are placed on items like:

◢ Aerosols	◢ Cigarettes	◢ Hazardous materials
◢ Air bags	◢ Dry ice	◢ Nail polish
◢ Alcoholic beverages	◢ Explosives	◢ Perfumes
◢ Ammunition	◢ Fresh fruits and vegetables	◢ Perishables
◢ Animals		◢ Poison

Also note that some providers may allow you to ship usually restricted items but will require some extra paperwork and fees. You'll want to take this into consideration as you evaluate providers.

For information on shipping internationally, check out the Federal Trade Commission's Electronic Commerce: Selling Internationally guide, which will help answer questions about taxes, duties, and customs laws.

05   Inventory.

Maybe you're thinking of storing the clothing for your online boutique in a spare closet or packing your handmade jewelry in too many storage boxes to count?

While your determination is alive and well, believe it or not, your business may be too large to legally run out of your home.

If you'll be holding substantial inventory, you should also check your lease, deed, or zoning codes to see if there are any prohibitions on running a business like the one you're contemplating out of your home.

You may be surprised to learn that you could benefit from having a brick-and-mortar location or warehouse in the early stages of your business.

If you're hesitant to open an offline location for your customers to shop and are unable to run your business out of your home, don't fret — you have more options.

In fact, it may be time to reevaluate your product sourcing plan. Try leveraging a partnership with a **shipping and fulfillment company** that specializes in **dropshipping** or **3PLs**.

Bonus? By using a dropshipping or 3PL service, you reduce shipping zones, or the distance packages travel, which will typically reduce the cost of shipping and time in transit. A win-win for both your business and your customers.

Having a clear and organized inventory management strategy in advance will help you create a scalable business plan for the future.

06 Age restrictions.

Anytime you launch a website, it's absolutely required that it comply with the **Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)** — no exceptions.

This act includes quite a few regulations, but the one that will likely apply to your site is the inability to collect any personal information from a child under the age of 13.

If you're planning on selling a product or service tailored specifically to a young audience, you'll need to abide by COPPA regulations.

As far as age verification requirements for ecommerce stores selling age-restricted items, you should look into your country's specific codes.

For instance, sites selling items like vapes or alcohol need to have age verification tools before checkout in order to be legally sold.

Every country is different as far as their demands on how to run a business, and things get especially tricky when it comes to age restrictions on products.

Do your research and stay on top of legislation to ensure your business is on the up-and-up.
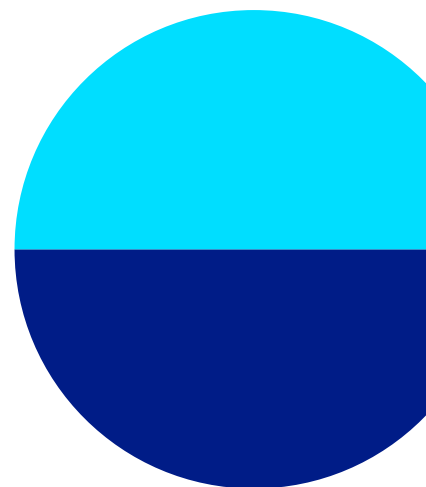
07 Business insurance.

There are multiple types of **insurance for small businesses**, including general liability, product liability, professional liability, commercial liability, and home-based insurance.

Reach out to your local insurance provider to find out which type would be best for your business and location.

During your vetting process, it's a good idea to at least take a look at **product liability insurance**. It's intended for companies that manufacture, wholesale, distribute, and retail a product and may be liable for its safety.

This is especially important if you plan on selling products that are considered high-risk, like **CBD**.

Also look into professional liability insurance (also known as errors and omissions insurance), which protects your business against malpractice, error, and negligence.

08 Licenses and permits.

Depending on which product you decide to offer, **you may need a license** to sell it.

This varies based on the country in which you're located, so contact your local licensing department.

Legal Zoom is a great resource that can not only help with licensing, but with other red-tape items in this section.

"If you're selling special products to a regulated industry (e.g., medical devices or holistic health care supplements), you'll need to check with your state to see if you need to be licensed to provide those kinds of products or service," wrote **Nina Kauman for Entrepreneur**.

"But, generally, the sale of digital information, clothing, or handcrafted items (made in the USA) doesn't require a special business license. Rather, the business licensing required for an online retail business is not substantially different than that of a storefront business.

09 PCI compliance.

PCI compliance is a necessary protection for online sellers, and nearly all SaaS ecommerce platforms have it baked in to some degree.

Online businesses tend to be prime targets for data theft, which is why ecommerce providers take it so seriously — and why you should too.

Educating your business on **PCI compliance** is the first step to making sure you're protected.

Being PCI compliant doesn't just mean providing a secure, encrypted checkout experience — you'll also need to avoid storing any purchasing information on paper or via recording (e.g., if someone were to give you their card number over the phone).

BigCommerce Has You Covered

BigCommerce takes care of the vast majority of your PCI compliance needs.
Our Cardholder Data Environment is PCI DSS 3.1 Level 1 certified as both a
Merchant and a Service Provider. This protects against credit card data breaches
and eliminates the significant cost and hassle of compliance.

10 What you didn't know you needed to know.

There are also individual platform requirements that you may need to be aware of before starting your business.

For instance, when you download Facebook Messenger (which you can now **use to transfer payments**!), you are agreeing to have Facebook listen to you and serve ads based on what you say.

No, you were not imagining ads popping up after having a conversation with your spouse in the kitchen earlier that night. But, it's 2020 and this is our new reality.

Being transparent with your business and your customers will eliminate the chance of any upsetting legal conflicts or lost business.

Trust is something that is earned with your customers, so take the initiative to be well informed and protect your brand by building an online store that meets all legal requirements. Better to be safe than sorry, right?

Understanding the implications of all these laws is essential for the health of your business — and the protection of consumers who become your customers.

Continue on to the next chapter to learn how to conduct market research to ensure that your product idea is not only feasible, but profitable, too.

How to Identify and Analyze Your Target Market
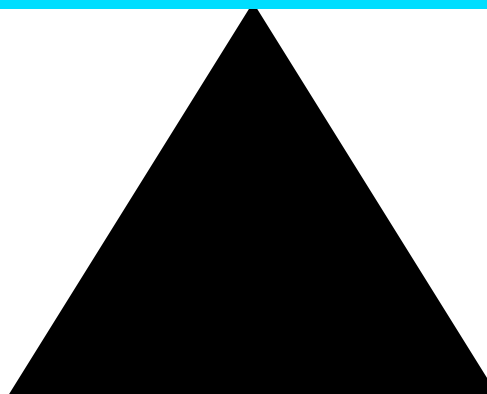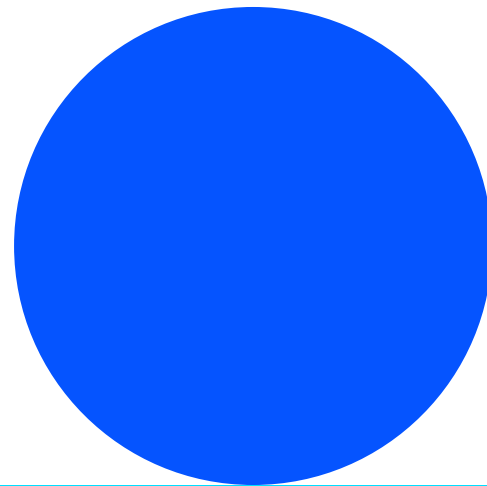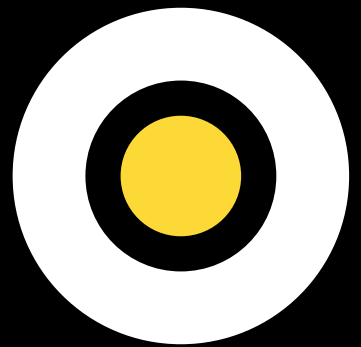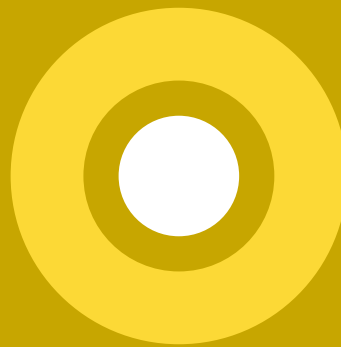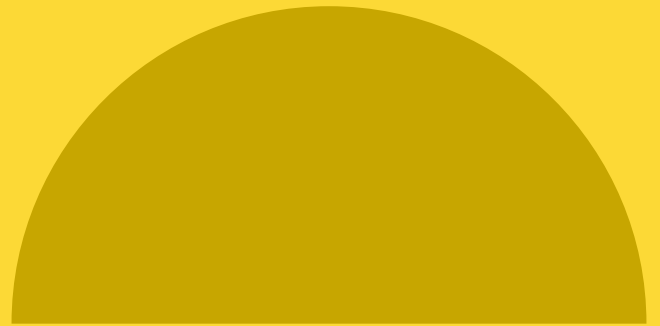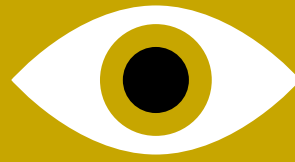
Chapter 6: How to Identify and Analyze Your Target Market

In a perfect world, every single human would love your product. But, as we all know - life isn't perfect.

Although your products might appeal to a large group of people, it doesn't make sense to market to everyone. If you did, it would be like playing darts while being blindfolded. Not very effective and, quite literally, a shot in the dark.

What your brand needs is a target market: your guiding light that tells you who to go after with your marketing campaigns.

By adding a target market into your strategy, you'll be able to more effectively market to customers while pinpointing their exact needs and reducing ancillary spend.

Let's dive into what a target market is and how you can craft one that's unique to your business.

What is a Target Market?

You need to identify the people who really want or need what you're offering.

Targeting, or segmenting, these people means you'll be able to build your store for the right audience, efficiently using your resources to impress and attract your potential customers.

To begin, you'll want to establish the need for your product or service, focusing on what problem it can solve.

Then refine your target market by identifying who has bought your product or service already.

This includes target demographics, audience type, and any other attributes associated with your target customer. If your product or service is brand new, you may want to look to your competitors to gain additional insights.
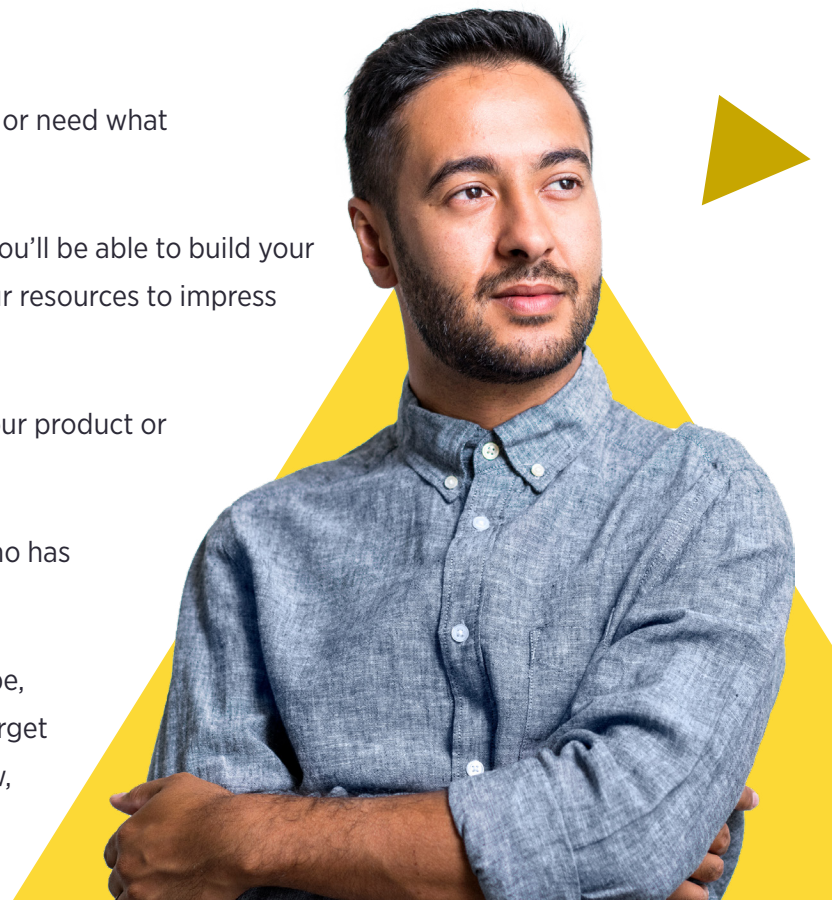
In all transparency, the toughest part of this process is to avoid making assumptions. This is vital to the quality of your customer targeting, because if your assumption is incorrect - it's a direct hit to your conversion rates.

For example, if you want to start a handmade pet biscuit business, you are probably an expert on your products' many benefits.

But don't assume consumers know these things as well as you do. They may not even know such a product exists.

As tempting as it is to fill in the blanks, you should engage with your potential customers and conduct as much research as possible.

As your business grows, you should continue to evaluate and stay up to date with your target market.

Your target market is absolutely dynamic. It's always evolving and taking new shapes.

For instance, down the road you may want to expand and sell internationally.

Or you might think you are catering specifically to men, when in actuality you are selling to wives and girlfriends who are shopping for their fellas.

Knowing who you're targeting, and continually refining it, will ensure you're on the right track.

How to Identify and Analyze Your Target Market

By the end of this chapter, you'll be prepared to answer these key questions:

- What are the features of your business, products or services?

- What are the benefits of these features?

- How do the benefits help the user?

- How does your target market shop?

- What is the typical age and gender of your target market? Do they usually have children? What is their average income and education?

- What are their common interests? These can include attitudes, values and lifestyle.

- Is your target market comfortable with online? What web and offline marketing methods engage them?

Now - we'll show you how to find the answers.

01 Gather intel.

Clearly defining your target audience — whether it's senior citizens, busy moms or even as specific as **millennials in Texas** — can help you answer questions and overcome obstacles as you kickstart your online store.

Here are a few business questions you'll want to address:

- ◢ Is the potential market for your product or service large enough?
- ◢ Do you need to alter your business idea to best appeal to this audience?
- ◢ Should you tailor your product or service in some way to maximize effectiveness?
- ◢ How can you target your marketing efforts to optimize reach with the most promising potential buyers?

02 Create customer profiles and market segments.

Consumers who find your product or service appealing often share similar characteristics, which will help you fine-tune your messaging throughout the customer journey.

You can **craft a customer profile** to uncover those shared traits. This includes psychographic data about how the target customer behaves and additional basic information to help you identify your audience.

Start with demographic criteria:

- ◢ Age
- ◢ Location
- ◢ Gender
- ◢ Income level
- ◢ Education level
- ◢ Marital or family status
- ◢ Occupation
- ◢ Ethnic background
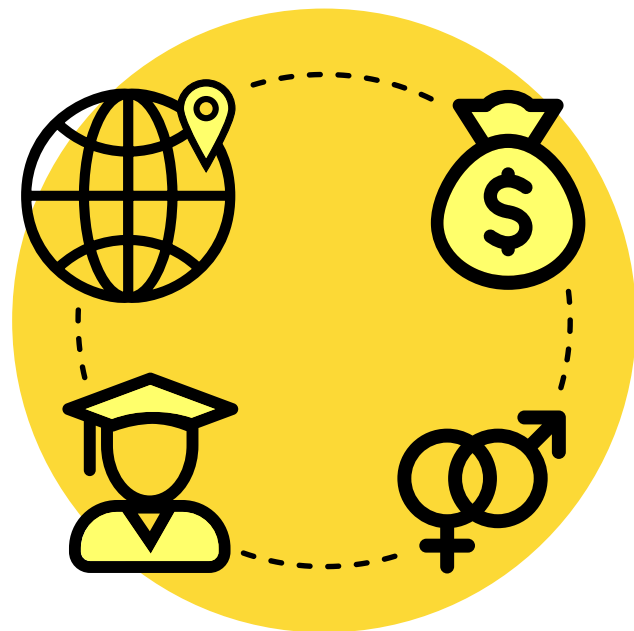
Then add psychographic criteria to go a little deeper and paint a more complete picture of your audience:

- Interests
- Hobbies
- Values

- Attitudes
- Behaviors
- Lifestyle preferences

Every industry, business and product is different, so these lists are by no means the end-all-be-all — think of them as more of a starting point to evaluate market segment size and opportunity.

Don't be afraid to make adjustments and include criteria that will add interesting layers to your profiles — the better you know your customer, the better you can sell to them.

03 Be specific.

Creating a very specific customer segment is more of an art than a science.

As you get started, try to be as specific as possible. For some brands I've had the opportunity to work with, we even created profiles for our target audience, for example:

- Our target audience is Mark, a 24-year-old man with a full-time job who spends his free time going to live music shows with friends. He makes an average of $65,000 a year and spends more money on experiences vs. material goods. He is most active on Instagram and frequently engages with influencer-related content.

By starting with a detailed customer profile, you'll be able to make educated decisions when it comes to building custom audiences and crafting compelling advertising and marketing campaigns.

New entrepreneurs often worry that they'll be too specific as they conduct their research, fearing that it will limit their reach.

In reality, identifying a specific target audience helps ensure that you make decisions that are dictated by your customers, which sets you up for long-term success.

Drill down on who your audience truly is and study:

- Their attitudes
- Beliefs
- Pain points
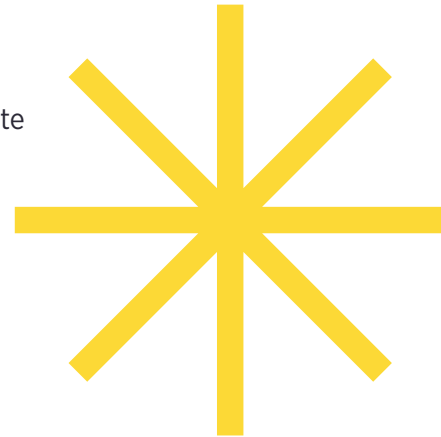
Understanding their age and income is the first step, but drilling down to the core customer problem is what will help set your products — and brand — apart from the competition.

04   Tap existing resources.

If you do a quick search online, you'll often find existing resources that can help you pull together information about your industry, the market segment, your competition and your ideal potential customer.

The best part is, someone has already done the work.

In most instances, the information you gather won't cost you a thing.

However, the downside is that the research you find may not be as focused or useful as you'd like.

Below are a few resources that will add more color to your research and help you get started:

Quantcast

- **Quantcast** provides free, accurate and dependable audience insights for over 100 million web and mobile destinations.

amazon alexa

- **Alexa** transforms raw data into meaningful insights that will help you find your competitive advantage.

Google Trends

- **Google Trends** uncovers where your target customers are predominantly located.

ahrefs

- **Ahrefs** provides a tool to help you identify all the backlinks to any competitors, showing you which industries and third-party websites may be the most interested in what you have to offer. This is one of the best tools for finding SEO and online marketing opportunities.

All of this information will help you **develop a strong brand identity**.

05   Look at your competition.

In the last chapter, we showed you how to complete a competitive analysis. Now take all of what you learned in your research and ask yourself these questions about your competitors:

- **What's their market positioning?** What are customers actually purchasing from them?

- **How about their pricing?** What are their customers willing to pay? Would they pay more if you offered something extra?

- **What are customers saying on social media?** What social media channels are they interacting with the most? What other interests do they list on their personal social media pages? What do they do for a living? What are their hobbies? How are they describing their business and products?

- **Are reviews screaming with opportunity?** What weaknesses did you identify from their reviews that you may be able to address with your business?

Depending on how well your competitor is doing, you may not want to go after a similar market segment. But, on the other hand, if their customers are extremely unsatisfied with current offerings, it may be a great opportunity to shake things up and compete head on.

Someone with a strong business acumen will identify competitors' weaknesses, discover overlooked areas of the market, and capitalize on new opportunities to drive online success - with the help of concentrated marketing efforts.

06 Conduct your own primary research.

You can learn a lot about your target audience through primary research, which involves gathering data directly from consumers.

Although primary research can be a little more expensive than other methods, it allows you to **truly listen to the voice of your customer** and get answers to specific questions regarding your business.

Here are some things you can try out:

- **Distribute surveys:** Send surveys to existing and potential customers via mail, email or a web-based service like **SurveyMonkey**.

- **Conduct interviews:** Talk to consumers who might fit in your target market. For example, you could stand in a high-traffic area at a trade show and ask attendees to answer a few short questions.

- **Assemble focus groups:** Get feedback from a small group of consumers who fit your ideal customer profile via Q&A sessions and group discussions.

07 Look at your business in a fresh light.

Now that you have some serious insight into who you are selling to, it's time to ask yourself a series of questions.

- Do you feel there are enough potential customers within your target audience to start a brand

new business?

- ◢ Will your target market benefit from your product or service?

- ◢ Will this target market see a true need for it? Will they come back repeatedly to purchase?

- ◢ Do you understand what drives your target market to make buying decisions?

- ◢ Can your target market afford your product or service? If so, how frequently can they buy?

- ◢ Can you reach your market with your message? How easily accessible are they?

Going through these questions will help you understand if you are ready to sell online or if you need to pivot your marketing focus (and potentially your products) to appeal to a different audience.

At the end of the day, the goal is to perform targeted marketing efforts that put the right message in front of key segments, which is why you'll want to keep data on your target audience up to date.

Every six to 12 months, conduct additional primary research and refine your customer profile accordingly. This will help you refine your product strategy and brand voice.

As the marketplace shifts and evolves, your target customer may change. Get ahead of the curve, and you'll always be one step ahead of your competition.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to source and manufacture products for your online business.

How to Source & Manufacture Products
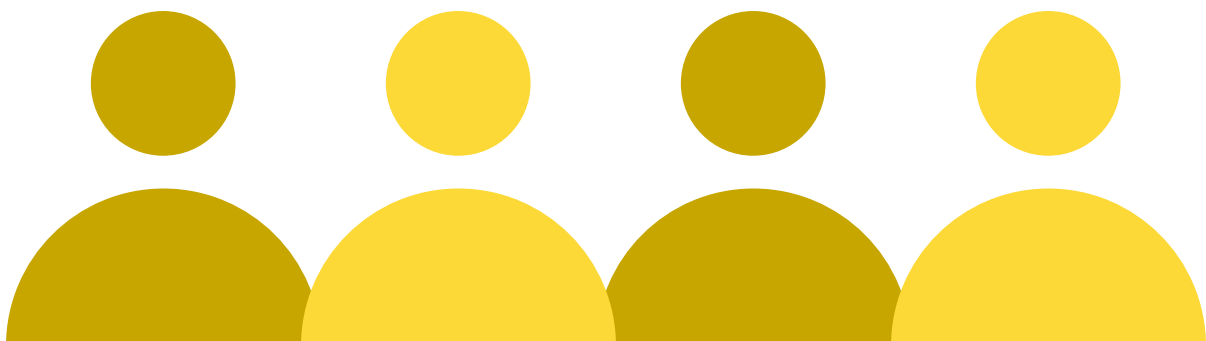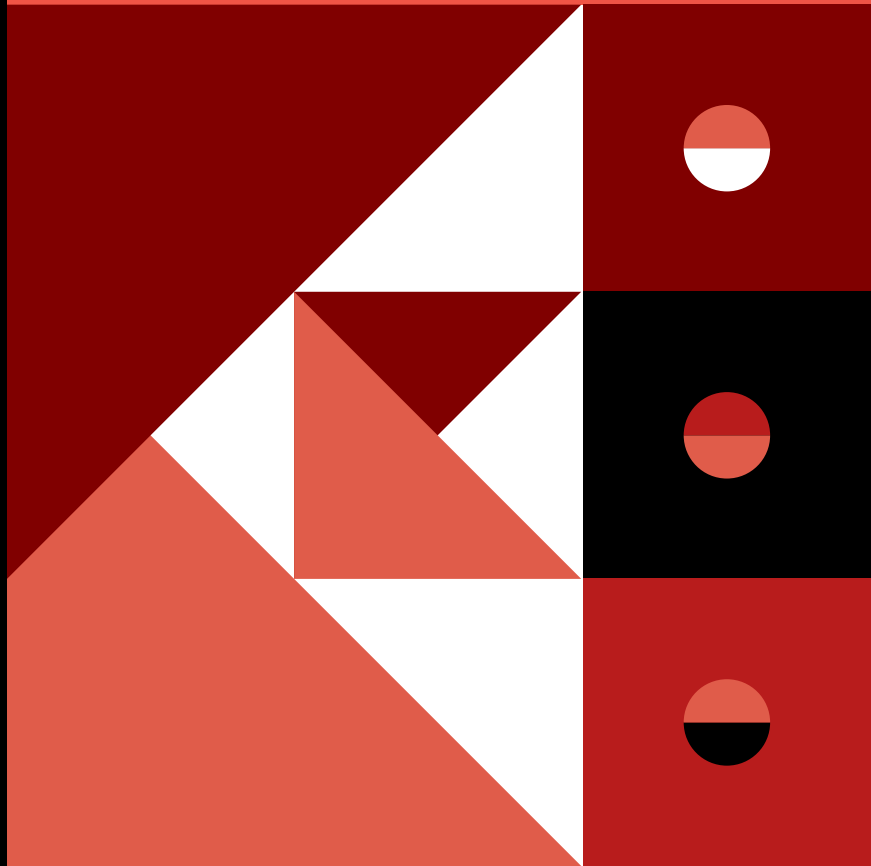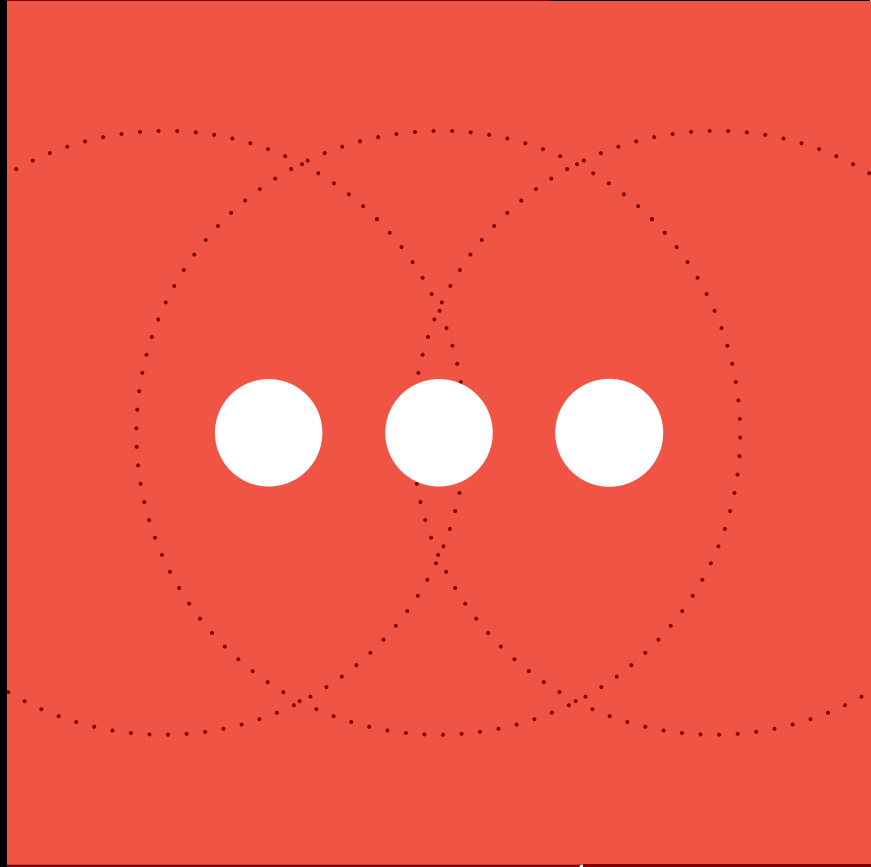
Chapter 7: How to Source & Manufacture Products

Congrats, you've successfully found a niche product to sell that has great market viability, competitive advantage, active target audience, and fits within legal requirements. You found the perfect product for your business!

Now you need to figure out how you'll source your products.

How you source products will serve as the foundation for your business, guiding your day-to-day activities.

In this chapter, you'll learn about your options for sourcing: the perks and common pitfalls that come with navigating how to sell online.

What is Product Sourcing?

Product sourcing is the process by which a business **attains a product to sell**.

There are a variety of methods by which sellers source their products. Most sellers use a combination of methods including dropshipping, wholesale, print on demand, and custom manufactured.

Types of Product Sourcing

You have three primary sourcing options to consider.

- ◢ DIY products or services
- ◢ Work with a manufacturer or wholesaler
- ◢ Hire a dropshipper

No option is inherently better than another, but there are a variety of factors to weigh when determining which works best for your business — and for you.

01 DIY products or services.

The idea of crafting your own product dates back centuries.

Today, thanks to the internet, you now have a much wider reach for selling handmade goods — like, handmade jewelry.

But if you're thinking about creating your own products, there are some factors to consider.

First, you will have full control over your brand and will likely be coming into the space with something new when introducing a handmade product.

Second, startup costs are typically low, although you're going to need to put time and energy into your business, which is a sacrifice in and of itself.

And, third, you'll want to make sure you're always thinking ahead about how you will scale and possibly grow your product line over time. This will help you stay competitive and offer your customer base something new.
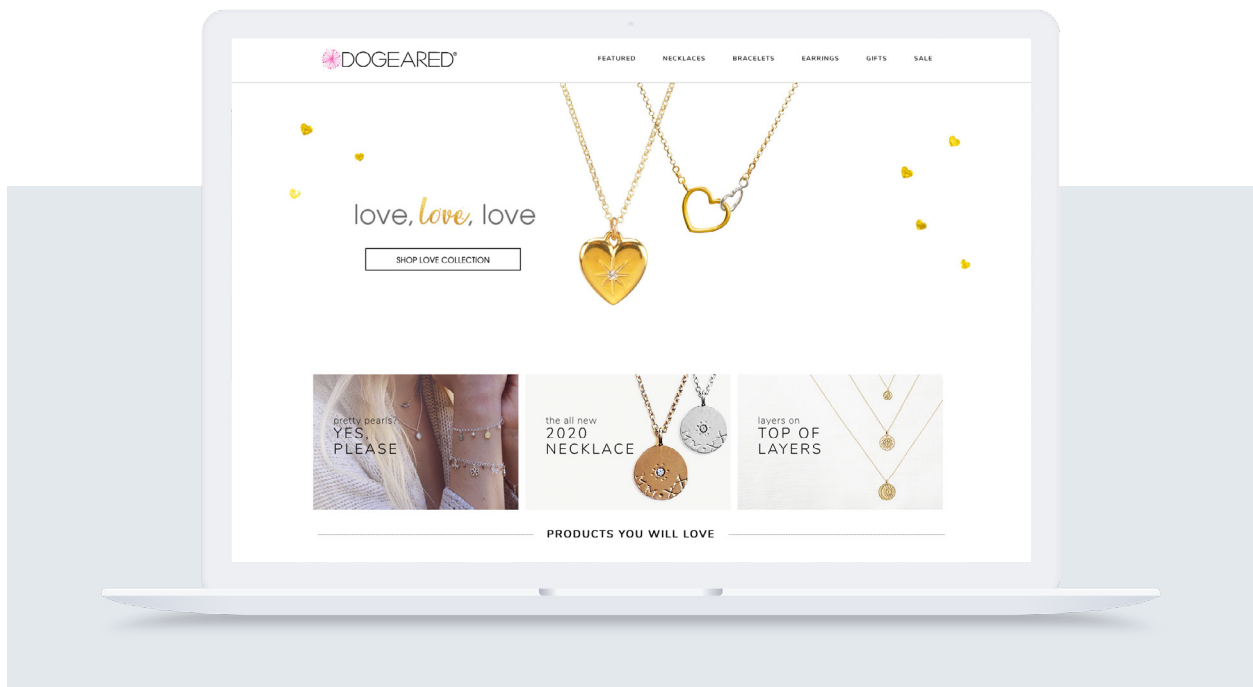
A Checklist to Get You Started:

SOURCE MATERIALS.

- It could be from your local flea market, craft stores, estate sales, an established retailer, or even friends and family. Identify your materials, where you'll get them, and how much they'll cost.

DETERMINE HOW YOU'LL SHIP ORDERS.

Will you be running to the post office or UPS store yourself, or
Will hiring a shipping service save you more time and energy?

LEARN WHAT IT WILL TAKE TO SHIP.

- Give thought to packaging, since it will have downstream effects on total costs and could create shipping challenges later on.

- Look into companies like Noissue, which make it possible for your packages to reflect your brand feel. After all, the rise of the "unboxing experience" could have a long-lasting effect on your customer experience.

CALCULATE HOW LONG YOUR PRODUCTS TAKE TO MAKE.

- You should know exactly how long it takes to make a product. Also, be sure to document any labor costs, whether it's money or time spent.

- You'll also need to decide whether or not you will:
  Make items to order or
  Keep inventory on hand.

CONSIDER WHERE YOU'LL STORE YOUR INVENTORY.

- Even if you're small enough to legally run your business out of your home, that probably won't scale with your business. Look into alternatives like renting a space, opening a storefront, or using a 3PL.

MAKE A PLAN FOR COMMUNICATING TIMELINES.

- Your website should set expectations on how long it takes to craft a product and complete an order. You can do this in places like your product description and shipping and returns policy, plus reiterate in your transactional emails. It's always better to be transparent and upfront so your shoppers feel confident purchasing from you.

02 Working with a manufacturer or wholesaler.

Working with a **manufacturer or wholesaler** means you're hiring a partner to develop your product.

This is a great option if you aren't able to make a product yourself, when you're ready to scale your DIY product by hiring someone else to make it for you, or to supplement for higher than planned sales.
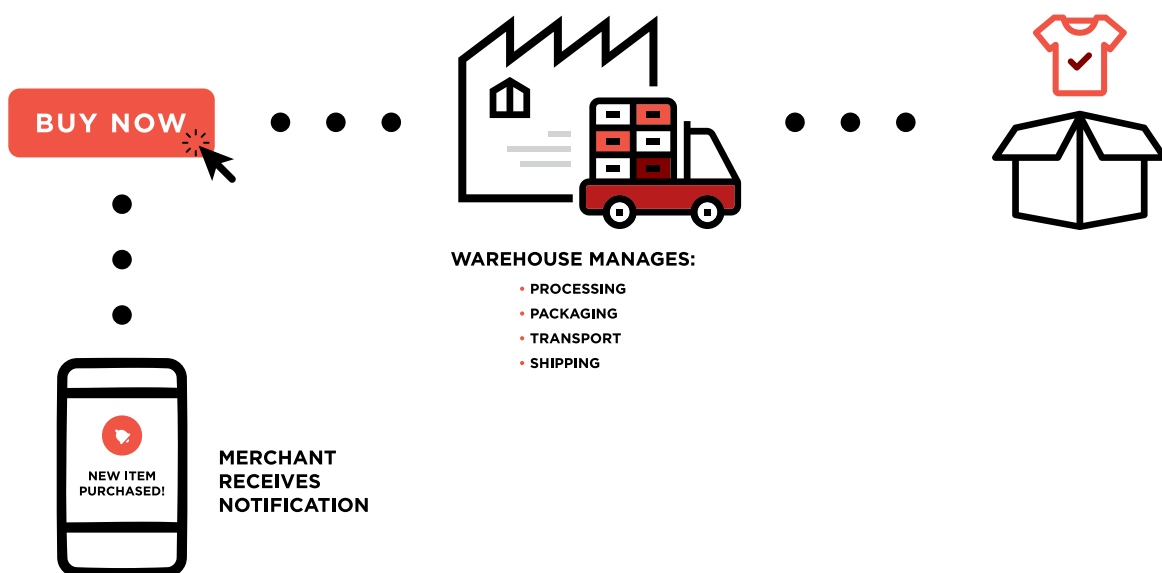
While this gives you the option to pursue a unique idea or sell popular products without making anything yourself, you may need to invest more heavily upfront.

You can still have control over your brand and the quality of your product, plus get a great deal of assistance with production.

To determine if hiring a manufacturer or wholesaler is right for you, you'll want to consider a few factors.

First, you'll need to find the products.

If you're looking for a product to sell, this can be as simple as forming a business relationship with a friend who makes a product you'd like to sell, product-sourcing using Alibaba, partnering with an existing company to take their business online or from B2B to B2C, hiring a manufacturer, building relationships with makers on Instagram, or using **Etsy Wholesale**.

BUY NOW

WAREHOUSE MANAGES:
• PROCESSING
• PACKAGING
• TRANSPORT
• SHIPPING

NEW ITEM PURCHASED!

MERCHANT RECEIVES NOTIFICATION

If you're looking for a manufacturer to make your products, you can easily research options online. Remember that finding the right partner can take some time, so don't get discouraged. It's worth the wait to make sure you choose the right partner to create your dream product.

Next, you'll want to check references for the manufacturer or wholesaler in consideration. As with any business, you need to make sure you're dealing with someone who is legitimate.

Reach out to others who have used the manufacturer or wholesaler, and maybe do a little digging at the **Better Business Bureau**. It's a good sign if the company you're researching asks for information that proves that you have a legitimate business, too. Be prepared to provide necessary licences or tax information.

Now, it's time to evaluate your options. Be sure to ask questions of each company you're considering so you can make the best decision:

- What will the total cost of production and shipping be? Are there any potential hidden fees?

- How long will it take for them to create, fulfill, and ship the product?

- What does shipping and inventory management look like? Will you need to ship and store, or is that included as part of their service? Is there any additional cost? What are the timelines and conditions? Do you have control over package branding?

- What do the contracts and terms look like? Is there any wiggle room for things your business or customers need? Is there an evaluation period or terms for termination?

- What do support and communication look like? How frequently will you be updated on information like inventory, product changes, or even discounts?

- What are the minimum order quantities? Will you have to commit to a certain number of units or spend a minimum amount?

When you're ready to take the next step with a manufacturer or wholesaler, you'll want to sample the items you plan on selling. Before you sign on with anyone, make sure their products meet your expectations. While some manufacturers will charge a fee to send you a sample, you can often negotiate a deal to only pay for it if you keep it.

The final step: weigh your options and confirm your partnership! You want to ensure you're making a smart decision, but that doesn't mean you should sit in research mode forever. Worst case, you pivot and go another direction.

03   Hiring a dropshipper.

Dropshipping is a method of product sourcing that lets you purchase from a vendor and list their products on your online store. You essentially won't need to deal with inventory, packaging, or fulfilment.

The vendor charges you for the products as they are sold, and typically ships orders on your behalf.

It's a great option for starting a new online business, but it's also great for expanding the product catalog of an existing store.

The catch is that you'll typically have more competition, as many of the products offered by dropshippers are readily available all over the internet.

However, most have a wide selection of products from which you can choose. Dropshipping usually gives you a lower profit margin, so you'll need to sell a lot before making a good profit.

The steps to find a dropshipping supplier or aggregate dropshipper — a dropshipper that works with a variety of dropshippers for you — are nearly the same as those you'd follow for the manufacturing option.

- Find some options
- Check their references
- Evaluate all of your options
- Ask for samples
- Pick one and get started

Now that you've taken all the steps to create a detailed business plan, let's dive into the next chapter to learn about how to choose an ecommerce platform and finally launch.

Choosing The Right Ecommerce Platform For Your Business
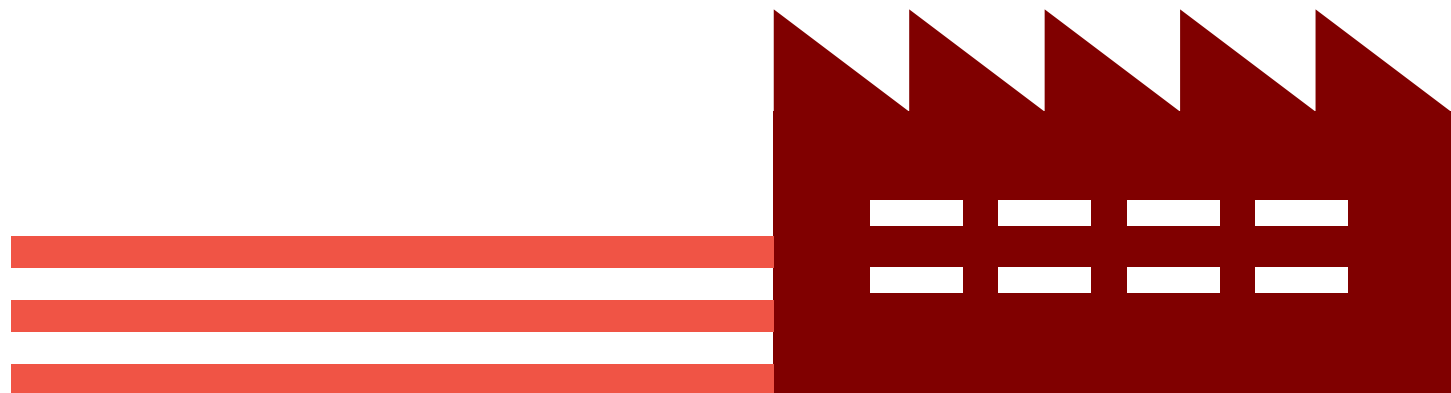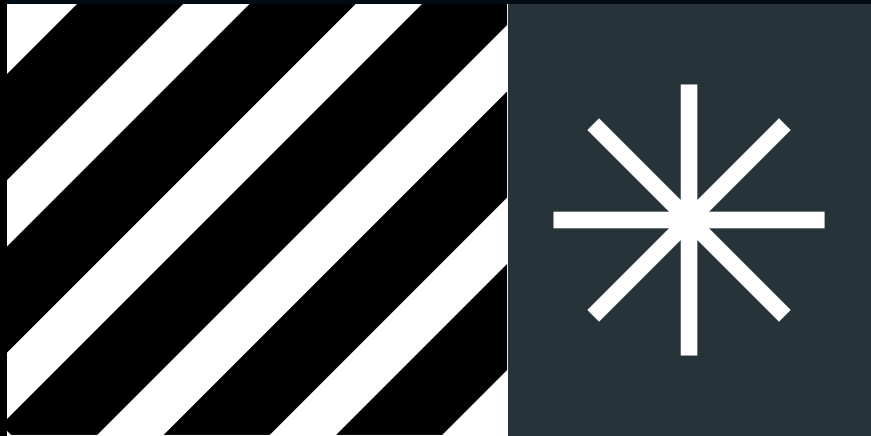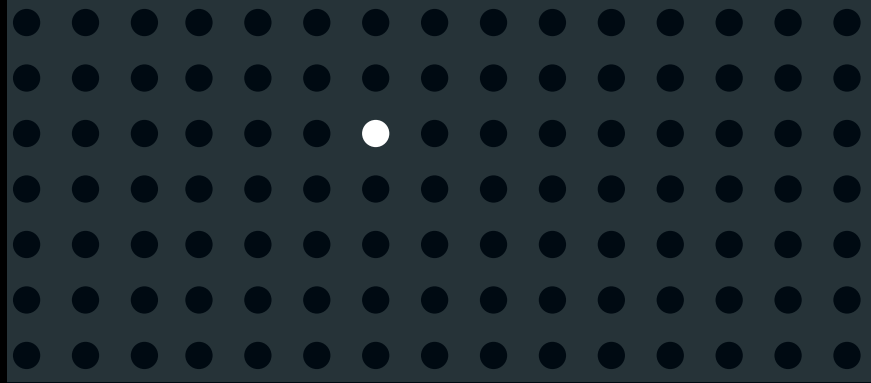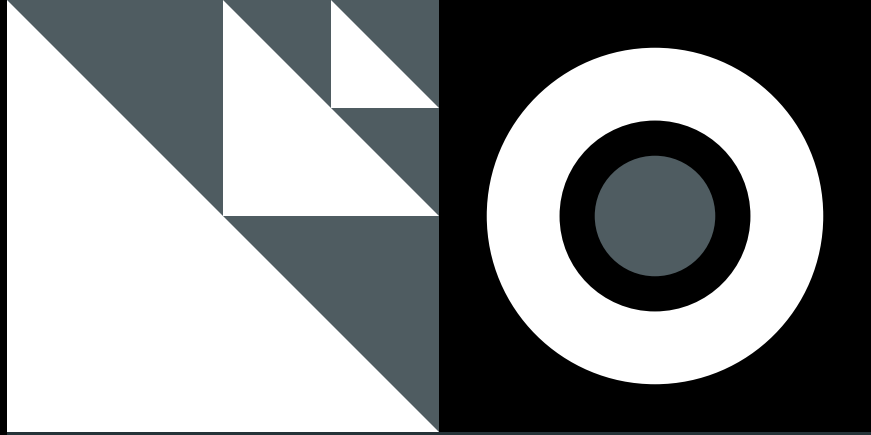
Chapter 8: Choosing The Right Ecommerce Platform For Your Business

Now that you've done all the research, it's time to choose your ecommerce platform, build your store, and launch your small business.

The vast majority of new online stores today choose to go with a SaaS solution like **BigCommerce**. And yes — that includes B2B businesses!

This is because there is:

- A low cost to entry
- No costly development or technical headaches
- A scalable framework that's designed to help you grow

Look for a platform with a great community of people both running it and using it who will testify to their success on the solution.

Get on their forum, check out **their blog**, and take a peek at **their support materials**.

But, before we get ahead of ourselves, let's get you familiar with ecommerce platforms and what they have to offer your online business.

What is an Ecommerce Platform?

An ecommerce platform is a software application that allows online businesses — small or enterprise — to easily manage their website, marketing, sales, and operations. Think of it as the central hub or homebase to your business.

Ecommerce platforms like **BigCommerce** offer the powerful features needed to run a business, while also integrating with common business tools — enabling businesses to centralize their operations and run their business their way.

The future of ecommerce.

As ecommerce technologies continue to advance, on-premise technology is falling more and more behind, and open SaaS ecommerce platforms, like BigCommerce, are taking a leap forward.

As brands demand more native user experience (UX) features, product or backend optimizations, there has been a massive shift to SaaS and headless commerce.

Brands can get to market materially faster with SaaS and headless commerce, in an average of 55 days.

SaaS ecommerce platforms remove much of the complexity from running an online business, such as:

- Product updates
- Security
- Hosting
- PCI compliance
- Every other task that comes with managing your own software are managed by the SaaS platform

At the end of the day, headless commerce is an ecommerce solution that offers online businesses more control over their storefront.

Headless commerce is the future of ecommerce, in which the shopping cart is decoupled from the CMS.

Woah — what does that mean exactly?

Presentation Layer

API Layer

Content Outline
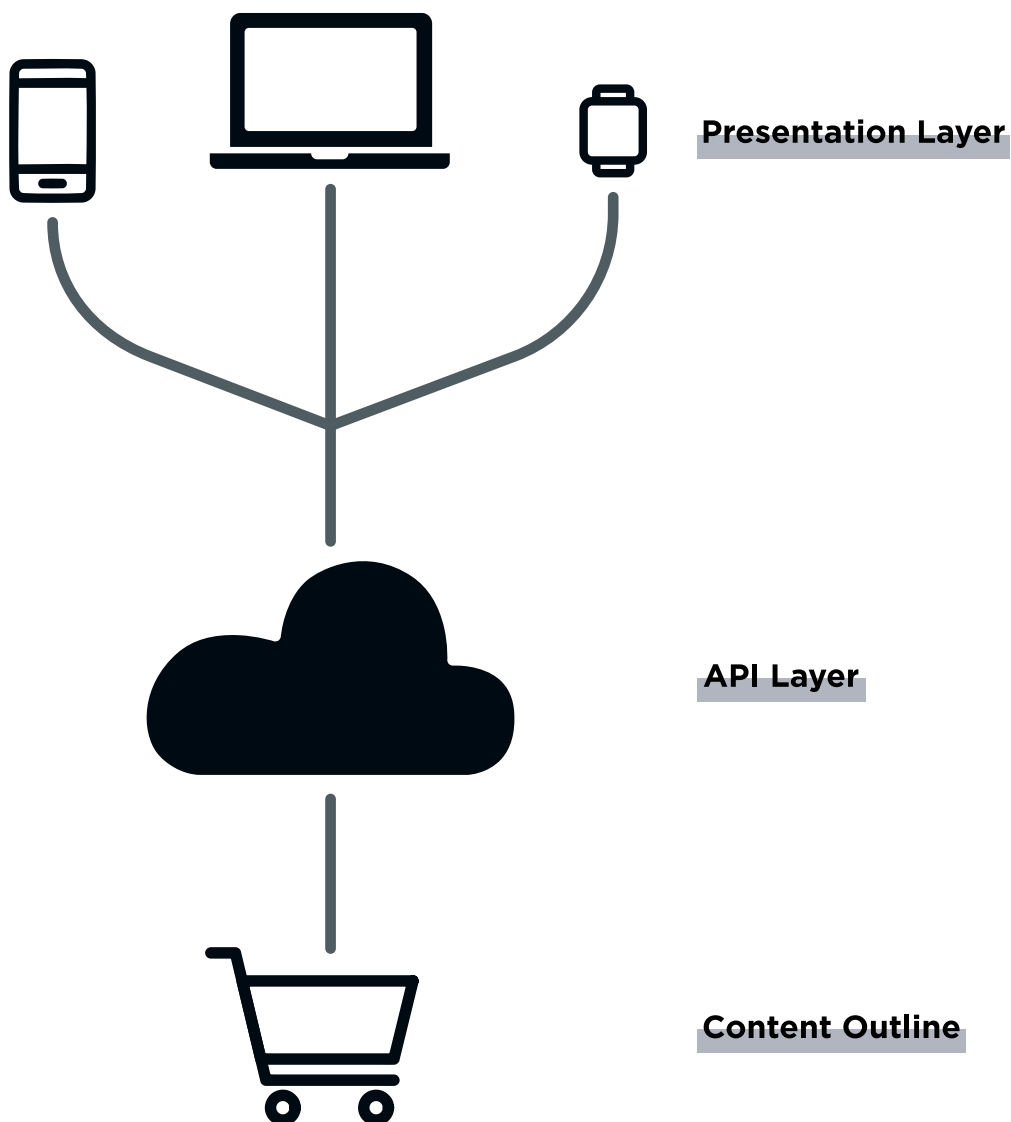
Instead of running your entire website on an ecommerce platform, you can use a content management system (CMS), like WordPress, to design the experience of your website. Then, you simply plug in an ecommerce shopping cart solution, like BigCommerce, to serve as the cart.

This option gives your store more customization and personalization options — all while being powered by the best ecommerce platform.

Firewire Surfboards is a great example of a headless commerce solution. The brand is using **BigCommerce for WordPress** — with WordPress as their CMS and BigCommerce plugged in as the cart on checkout.
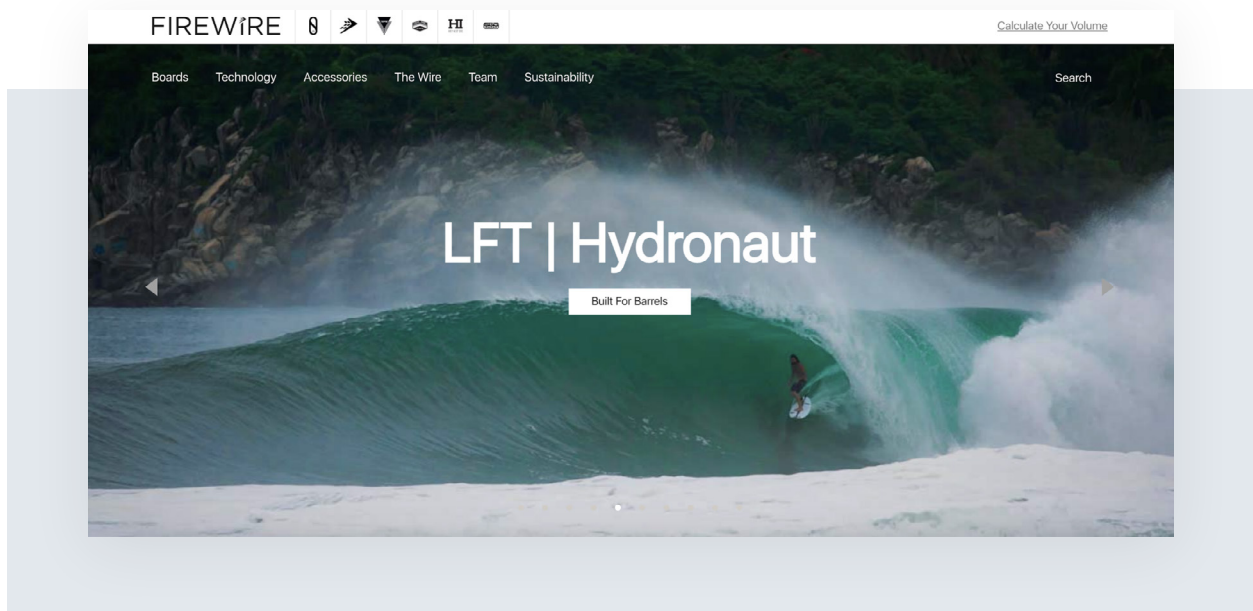
View the Firewire Surfboards experience here.

Web Hosting

There are two ways ecommerce sites can be hosted: self-hosted and cloud.

Neither of these two options are platforms in and of themselves.

Self-hosted ecommerce platforms.

Self-hosted ecommerce platforms require online store owners to find hosting, deal with installations, and, oftentimes, perform updates to the software manually.

Bad news: this means that you may have to take your website offline to perform these updates.

Truth is, running an ecommerce website using a self-hosted solution can be costly, as it often requires developers to maintain and update the website. In addition, you may not be able to make updates or edits without external help, which essentially strips away control of your online store.
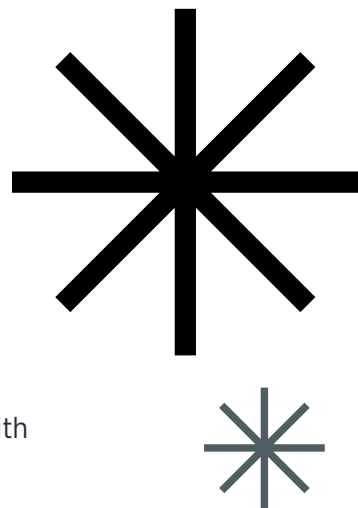
While the learning curve is steep with this option, there are benefits like:

- More control over your online retail platform

- Greater visibility of your own data

- A better understanding of data security

If you have a very complex business, take a look at this option.

If that's not you, shift your focus to cloud-hosted solutions for your ecommerce store.

Cloud-hosted ecommerce platforms.

In simple terms, cloud-hosted ecommerce platforms take on the responsibility of managing your store's uptime — the period a service (or a website, in our case) is available online.

Cloud-hosted ecommerce platforms like BigCommerce manage 99.9% uptime annually and have had four years of zero downtime during Black Friday and Cyber Monday, the highest trafficked times of the year.

Be sure to know that not all cloud-hosted ecommerce platforms offer automatic installations of patches, updates, or upgrades either. Only SaaS and headless commerce solutions do that.

5 Tips To Help You Choose an Ecommerce Platform

Every online shop has unique needs, and your ecommerce platform should reflect that.

There are, however, some native, out-of-the-box ecommerce tools and features that should come with your platform:

- Hosting environment, domain name, year-over-year uptime, and bandwidth

- An in-product website builder with free, user-friendly site themes and drag-and-drop functionality

- Extensive app store with pre-built integrations and add-ons (e.g. social media, email marketing) with best-in-class service providers

- Mobile-optimized site or mobile app with a UX-friendly checkout

- PCI compliance

- Visibility into your inventory management across all sales channels

- SEO tools and fully customizable URLs throughout the site (so you can rank on leading search engines)

- Built-in basic ecommerce features including promotions and discounts, analytics, catalog management, etc

- Great customer support

- Abandoned cart recovery tools

- Ability to sell an unlimited number of products (e.g. digital or physical products)

In order to be competitive in the market, you'll want to make sure you choose an ecommerce software with advanced features that are native to the platform — at no additional cost.

Taking this into consideration, let's dive in to the five tips that will help small business owners find the right platform for their ecommerce business.

01 Ask the right questions and start a free trial.

Like most steps you take in starting an online business, you'll want to be prepared with a set of questions that will help you make the right decision for your store.

You can connect with sales and support staff to get your burning questions answered, or test out features yourself by starting a **free trial**.

Just make sure you go through the following ecommerce planning checklist for each platform you consider:

Ecommerce Platform Functionality Checklist

THE ECOMMERCE PLATFORM:

Has everything I need, including drop-down menus or an editor.

Is easy to use — and, most importantly, I feel comfortable using it.

Offers a reliable hosting solution. That means no worries about my store crashing on high traffic days!

Offers incredible support — at no extra cost.

Supports the type of products I want to sell (e.g., physical or digital products).

- If the product has variations, how does the platform display all of these options? How simple is that to manage?

Allows me to sell directly to customers on Facebook, eBay, Amazon, and Pinterest, without managing separate inventories.

Is optimized for mobile devices — and allows me to easily customize it.

Is equipped with industry-best SEO optimization, so I can rank highly on Google and drive more traffic to my store.

Offers integrations with additional applications and is built with open APIs.

Is built with advanced native functionality and UX features.

Offers resources (e.g., blog) to get educated on how to sell online and how to grow my business over time.

SOME ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS YOU MAY WANT TO EXPLORE:

- Is there a limit to the number of products I can sell? Are there any transaction fees?

- How do I manage inventory?

- What payment options do I have (e.g., payment gateways like PayPal)? How much do they cost?

- What options can I offer for shipping?

- What are my options for themes? How customizable are those themes?

Even after you get the answers to these questions, make sure you take the ecommerce solution for a spin before signing up for a plan.
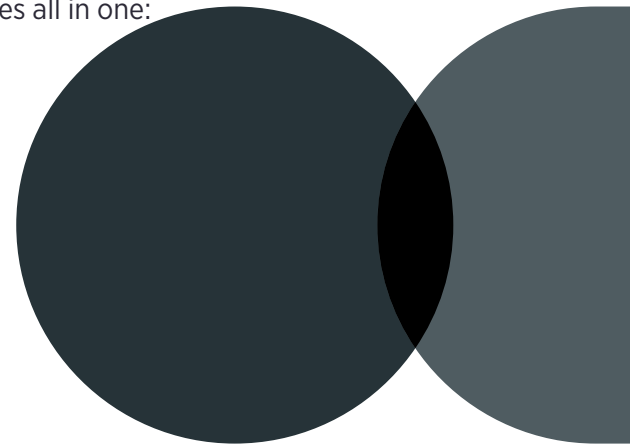
The remaining steps are some of the top concerns for new store owners when looking for an ecommerce platform.

02 Compare the cost of platforms.

Ecommerce platforms are not free.

The services they offer combine the need for multiple technologies all in one:

- ◢ Hosting
- ◢ Checkout
- ◢ Payments
- ◢ PCI compliance
- ◢ Fraud protection
- ◢ DDoS attacks
- ◢ Analytics, and more

Each ecommerce platform organizes all of this on the backend for easy access.

Ecommerce platform **pricing models** do differ, however, and it's crucial that you research your options. Pay special attention to what is included at each price point to make sure you capitalize on the most value for your spend.

For instance, it costs roughly $6,000–$20,000 more per year for Shopify merchants to achieve feature parity with the out-of-the-box functionality with BigCommerce.

Don't believe it?

Here's a competitive overview of the leading ecommerce store builders in the small business market:

WEBSITE BUILDER	WHO'S IT FOR?	PRICE
BIGCOMMERCE	Business owners and new shop builders.	Free 14-day trial with business plans starting at $29.95/month
shopify	Starter stores, hobbyists, and brands with SKU counts of less than 100.	Business plans starting at $29/month
SQUARESPACE	Portfolio builders, blogging, and artists.	Commerce plans starting at $26/month
WOO COMMERCE	Starter stores and hobbyists; bloggers expanding into ecommerce.	Business plans are free (but limited)
WIX	Site owners with little/no prior experience.	Business plans starting at $23/month
weebly eCommerce by Square	Starter stores, hobbyists, smaller businesses.	Free, Pro: $12/month, Business: $25/month
volusion	Starter stores and hobbyists.	Business plans starting at $269
bigcartel	Designed for smaller merchants who do not need a sophisticated platform.	25 products: $9.99/month 100 products: $19.99/month 300 products: $29.99/month

WEBSITE BUILDER	WHO'S IT FOR?	PRICE
GoDaddy	Entrepreneurs, hobbyists, starter stores.	Basic: $10/month Standard: $15/month Premium: $20/month Ecommerce: $25/month
3dcart	Starter stores and smaller manufacturers.	Startup store: $19/month Basic store: $29/month Plus store: $79/month Pro store: $229/month
opencart	Budding small businesses and the average novice.	Free, but if you want to purchase add-ons, costs range from $0 to $99,999.90 each
PrestaShop	Customers looking for free cloud-based platforms.	Free to start, add-ons range from $50 to $150 per module

As you can see, these popular ecommerce platforms vary in price (and total value). Do significant research to determine which platform will provide the most value for your business.

03   Determine which platform is best for your store's design.

Your site's design is a fundamental part of your business.

It is your first foot forward with your consumers. And today's consumers are used to excellent web design and UX.

When starting up an online store, it's important to **find a theme or template** that best represents your brand. There's no need to have to learn advanced CSS or HTML coding.

You'll want to find a theme or template that is customizable enough for immediate differentiation at launch and for long-term growth overtime.

Most platforms have **paid and free themes**.

I recommended starting trials with your top ecommerce platform choices, uploading filler content to the backend, and then previewing your site on multiple themes to see what will work best for you.

Look specifically for attention to device size, ease of use, customizability, and scalability over time.

Need some design inspiration? Here are some of our **favorite website designs**.
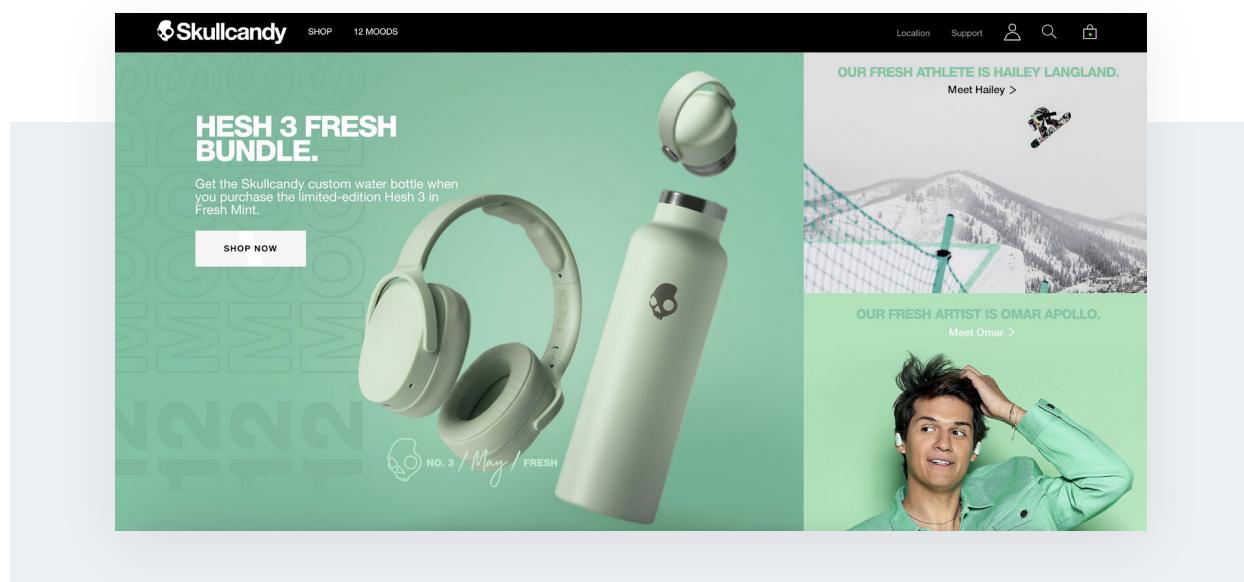
04 Test store functionality and ease of use.

When it comes to ease of use, you want to be able to do your job (typically marketing your brand) without having to learn a crazy amount of coding and greater technological knowledge.

This means that the platform needs to be easy to navigate, set up properly, and use over time.

Here are a few things to look for:

SETUP FLOW

Does the platform offer an easy setup flow, explaining everything you need to do before you launch, including loading in products, setting up taxes, domain name registration, payment processing and the like?

PRODUCT AND SKU MANAGEMENT

Bulk uploading products from CSV files is a much faster way to add products to your catalog once you have the basics set up. An unlimited product or SKU count is something you'll want to keep tabs on as well.

Be sure the platform you are on allows this, especially if you have a large or growing catalog.

ONE-CLICK APP MARKETPLACE

You'll want a plethora of one-click apps or already built-in integrations to help you grow without having to hire developers. Use your platform's app store to browse and integrate tools you want or need to use. Making sure these tools connect and update in real time is essential.

CENTRALIZED CHANNEL MANAGEMENT

The current state of ecommerce thrives on omnichannel strategies. Whether you realize it or not, today's customers are shopping everywhere and anywhere — Instagram, Etsy, Facebook, Amazon, you name it — and it's important that your product be exposed to your audience across various channels.

Once you launch and begin to see sales, you'll likely want to expand pretty quickly into additional channels.

With many ecommerce platforms, you'll then be required to manage both your ecommerce site platform as well as the platform of any other channel. This can get confusing, and even get you kicked out of certain marketplaces for unintentionally breaking the rules.

Look instead for a centralized channel management platform where you can push your product directly to those channels, manage price points and product descriptions, and more — all in one dashboard.

Determine the scalability and customizability of the platform.

05 Because you've planned your business so well, over time you will grow. And as you grow, you'll need additional support from your ecommerce platform.

What kind of support?

Well, that is hard to predict. Every business is unique. That's why many brands use APIs to customize and automate their stores based on their needs.
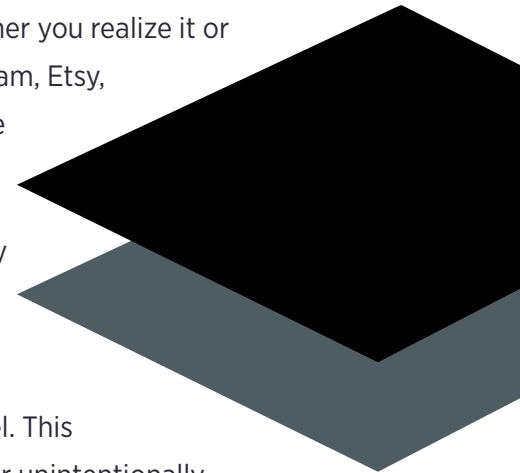
Businesses just starting out aren't quite at this point, but it's something you want to plan for if you intend to scale (and if you're reading this, then you probably do).

Plan well for this stepping stone and look for platforms with trusted and fast APIs.

For perspective, BigCommerce's API allows for hundreds of requests per second. To translate that, BigCommerce can update a 25,000 product catalog in roughly 60 seconds, whereas other platforms could take up to four hours to complete the same task.

Ultimately, when considering your options you'll want to make sure you're thinking long term. Save yourself time and add more value by focusing your efforts on marketing and business-related objectives. Don't let a lack of fast technology limit your success.

Once you've selected an ecommerce platform for your online store, you're ready for the next step: creating and launching your online store!

Launch a Profitable Online Store from Scratch
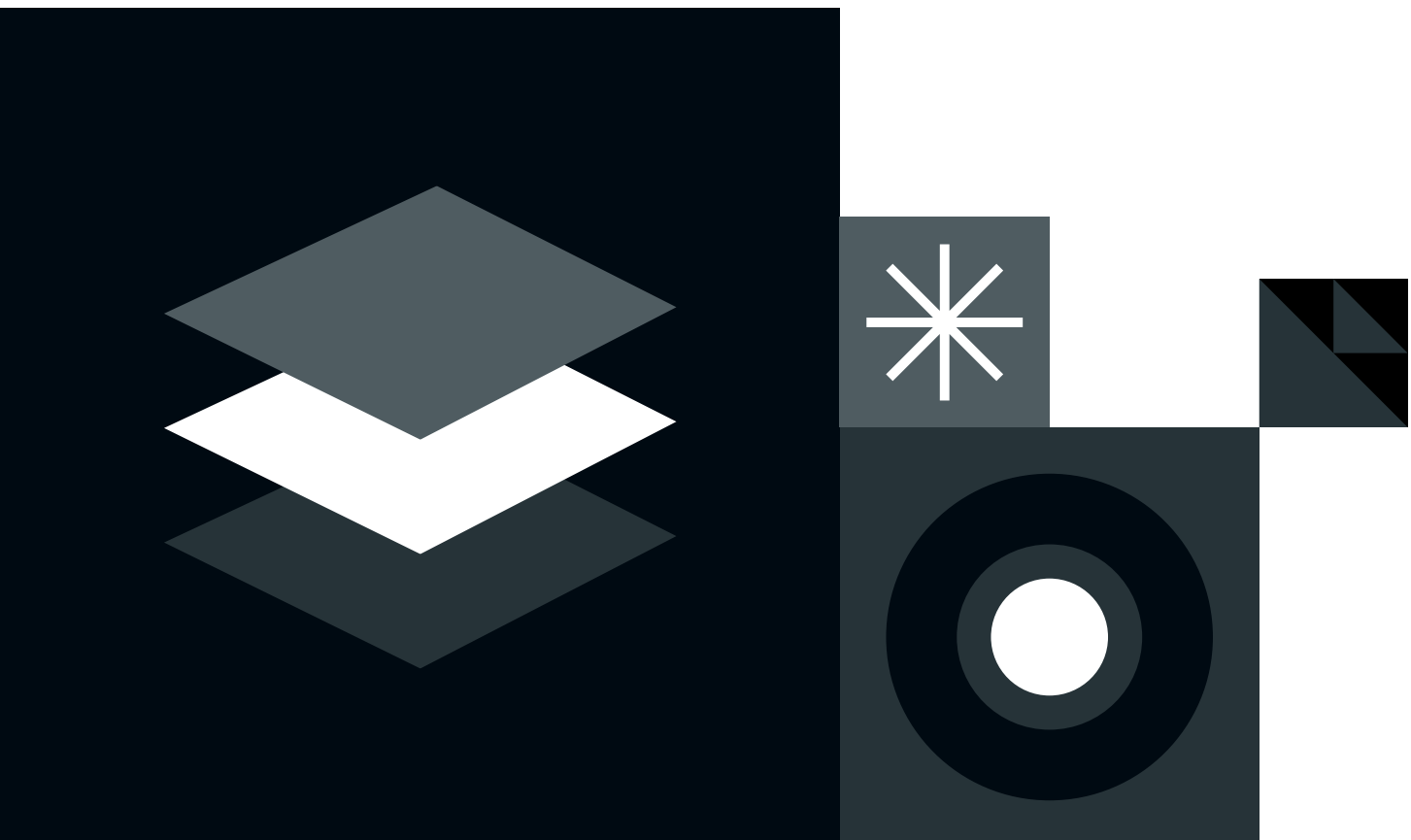
Chapter 9: Launch a Profitable Online Store from Scratch

We've covered everything from laws and nuances, to how to source product, to even giving you a **free startup template for a competitive analysis** in your industry.

By chapter, here's how we've prepared throughout the planning process:

- In Chapter 1, we learned how to decide what to sell.

- In Chapter 2, we helped you make sure you can actually sell it.

- In Chapter 3, you got to know other people who are selling it (and those already buying it).

- In Chapter 4, you learned how to analyze what your closest competitors are doing.

- In Chapter 5, you double checked to make sure you aren't breaking any laws.

- In Chapter 6, you identified your market (and your differentiators).

- In Chapter 7, you learned how you'll source your product.

- In Chapter 8, you learned what you need to know when selecting an ecommerce platform for your online business.

This brings us to Chapter 9 — where you'll learn how to create, set up, and launch a profitable online store.

Launching Your Online Store

Now that you've picked a platform, committed to a product and worked on winning over a target audience, we can focus on essential tips for creating and launching your store.

While you could whip a website together in a few hours, go live on the internet and just wait to see what happens — all you'll end up with is a handful of visitors and an empty bank account to show for it.

By creating an organized approach to launching your online store, you'll set up your store for long-term, scalable success.

01 Ensure your online store looks professional.

If you want to have a viable online business, you need to focus on quality from the outset.

You need to build a store that looks professional, attracts your target customer, and has the right calls to action to help them convert when they visit your site.

These next three steps are going to show you the basic blueprint to make sure you've got the right stuff to run a successful online store.

It's not about your website, it's about your product.

It is very easy to blur the lines of "design" and "functionality" when building your online store.

Not to say that design isn't important — an attractive website design can definitely drive online sales. But, your design shouldn't outshine what you are trying to sell.

Online shoppers will decide if they trust and want to purchase from your website in about three to five seconds.

That means you need to have a simple, trustworthy, and easy-to-use website.

What you are selling and where a customer needs to go to find it should be crystal clear. Resist the urge to overload your website with so many call-to-action buttons, categories, or imagery that people get overwhelmed or lose patience waiting for everything to load.

Marucci Sports is a great example of clean, focused design. Their unique product is front and center in every way.

Building your design on the right foundation is the first step.

Don't worry about colors or logos yet. Start by selecting a design template that really showcases your products or services.
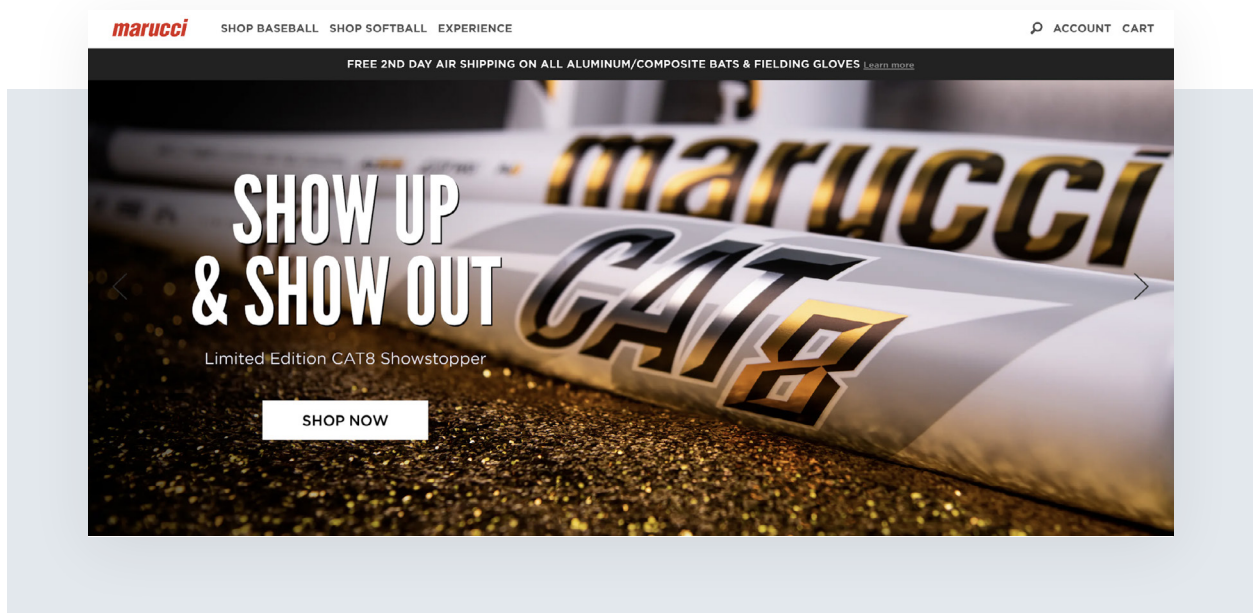
Your website should serve as a tool for effective online shopping. Overly styled sites run the risk of distracting customers rather than guiding them towards checkout.

Secondly, while picking a design template, make sure that the navigation menu is clear and does not overwhelm your customers.

By having clear navigation you will be able to present various product categories and ensure your customers know where to go within your store and never get lost.

If you only have a handful of product categories, selecting a theme with menu navigation across the top works great.

However, if you have too many products or more than nine main categories, think about consolidating them as best you can. You may also consider choosing a template that has navigation running down the left or right side.

You don't want to force shoppers to scroll far down the page to get the information they need. Potential customers should be able to see nearly all relevant and compelling parts of your site upon arrival.

Best yet, if you have a lot of categories, you can leverage your homepage design to let customers self-select their shopping journey.

Last, but certainly not least, make sure whatever design template you choose has a rock solid mobile version as well.

You will — without a doubt — lose sales if you don't provide your customers with a great mobile experience and streamlined checkout process.

Once your design is set, there are still a few elements you need to put in place to make sure your store is ready to accept orders.

The following steps are essential in helping you launch your store and setting you up for long-term success.

02 **Pick a payment gateway.**

In order to get paid, you'll have to be ready to accept payments. Might be obvious, but it's quite essential to running a successful business.

Payment gateways are how you collect money from your customers. Typically, your ecommerce platform will recommend which gateways work bet with their system.

BigCommerce supports over 60 different payment gateways and features one-click, digital wallet options like **Apple Pay** and **PayPal One-Touch**.

Once you have a list of options, you'll need to get a full picture of how it works and how it will affect your bottom line.

You also want to choose a payment gateways that can grow with your business. Before you lock yourself in, ask the following questions about each payment solution:

- Are there setup fees?

- Are there monthly and/or transaction fees?

- Are there penalty fees? If so, what triggers them?

- Is there a minimum balance requirement?

- What about transfer delays?

- When I need help or support who do I contact? How do I contact them? What hours are they available?

Ecommerce platforms like BigCommerce can help you get the lowest possible rates. For instance, the rate offered to a BigCommerce customer who use PayPal powered by Braintree is the lowest possible one out there. Research it. Go ahead. We'll wait.

03   Set up shipping integrations.

This step can feel a little overwhelming to someone just starting an online store.

Shipping options depend heavily on your product, your business model, your target audience, and your ecommerce solution.

The secret to success is making sure all of these factors work together. Fortunately, we have some tried-and-true best practices to put your mind at ease and increase your sales.

Shipping is an important value proposition for your store. It has the power to attract customers, but it can also push customers away.

So if you are new to selling online, think about starting small.

That means you may want to stick with domestic shipping and master that before you dive into international shipping.

There are a couple tips to keep in mind when you're getting started with online shipping.

1. **Start by researching your competition.** You may uncover some really great insights on what works and what doesn't in your category.

2. **Make your shipping policies are very straightforward.** This will prevent confusion or surprises, making it more likely your potential customer will follow through with their purchase.

3. **Lastly, offer multiple shipping options** based on different shipping speed or carriers. How quickly a shopper gets their product can be just as important as how much they pay for shipping.

Now, if you can offer free shipping on your products, do it! As of November 2018, **high shipping costs are the number one reason for cart abandonment**.

Primary reason for digital shoppers in the United States to abandon their carts as of November 2018

SHIPPING COSTS TOO MUCH	63%
DISCOUNT CODE DOESN'T WORK	46%
ORDER TAKES FOREVER TO SHIP	36%
HAVE TO RE-ENTER CREDIT CARD INFO	30%
HAVE TO RE-ENTER SHIPPING INFO	25%

Sources: Forter; OnePoll
©Statista 2019
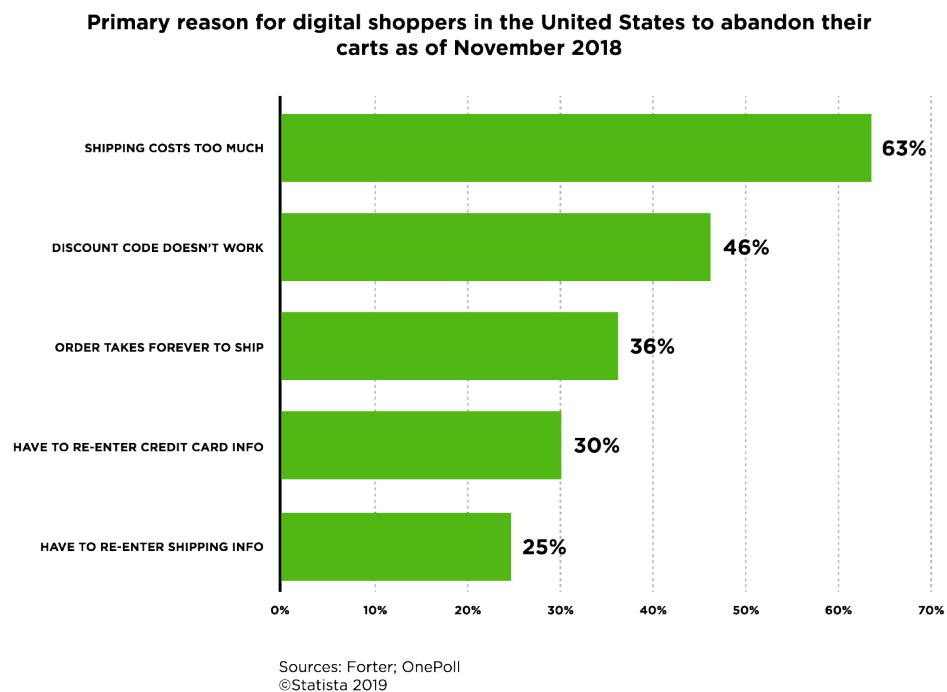
Added bonus: You can actually increase your average order value with free shipping or by offering free shipping at a minimum order amount.

Getting something for free has a huge impact on the psychology of making a purchase. Also, if you can provide **BOPIS** — buy online, pick up in store — as an option, you should. It's often easier for everyone involved, plus the customer doesn't have to pay any shipping costs. Talk about a win-win situation.

On the back end, you'll need to plan and organize your order fulfillment process.

A lot of new merchants neglect this step, and that can be extremely detrimental to your business as you grow.

If your products are sprawled across your coffee table right now, you have work to do. Even if you only carry a few items, you need to work on drafting up a procedure for what happens when an order is placed.

Here's what you should ask yourself regarding fulfillment:

1. How are you notified of a new order?

2. How do you print the invoice? How do you print the packing slip?

3. What packaging materials do you need?

4. What information goes with the product in the box? Directions for assembly or use, batteries or additional parts? Maybe a thank you note or coupon? The options are endless.

5. What does the presentation look like when opening the box? Does the look and feel of your packaging reflect your brand?

6. How do you organize products that need to be shipped? Are they in bins, refrigerators, rooms, or a warehouse? Can you place the product location in your online store so it prints on the invoice for a more streamlined approach?

If you don't spend time planning out this process, your customers may not get their orders on time, which makes for a bad first impression.

You've already turned a browser into a buyer, so do everything you can to keep them happy and coming back for more.

Just like chivalry isn't dead — neither is fighting for your customers' loyalty. You must continually provide a leading customer experience. Think about it — you wouldn't give less than 100% of your efforts to someone you care about, right?

04 Set up taxes properly.

I'll admit it, when I hear the word 'taxes' — I cringe. But, the reality is that setting up your taxes correctly from the beginning is a game changer for your business.

Luckily, we're talking about taxes for your business at this point, not local sales tax. So this step is pretty short and sweet — all you need to do is speak with a tax professional.

This doesn't necessarily have to be an accountant or CPA — it can also be a state comptroller or another authority on taxes in your area.

They will help you do things like attain your tax ID and understand your area's tax classes, rates, and structure. All of this can vary from location to location.

05 Trust me, you'll save money and headaches in the long run by consulting a pro.

Choose a great domain name.

Equally fun and challenging — picking a domain name for your website is critical. Your web address should speak to your brand and serve as an important marketing tool.

Your domain name will be a way for potential customers to find you and then come back to buy more. So keep it simple. Resist the urge to include difficult spellings or unknown acronyms.

If you have an established business already, don't change lanes and switch your domain!

Choosing a credible domain will instill confidence in customers and build customer loyalty, so take your time.

The Ultimate Guide to Ecommerce SEO

Your domain name is important for a variety of reasons — but likely the most important reason is because it is the URL off which you will build your entire brand. And that means it is the bedrock of your SEO strategy.

Make it irrelevant to the products you sell, and you'll have a long road ahead of you in communicating to Google (and the world) what your site is about.

Learn more about SEO best practices in the guide below.

06 Set up analytics to measure your success.

You need data and benchmarks to grow your business.

We recently highlighted 55 ecommerce metrics you should be tracking. **Download the spreadsheet to get started with that here**.

To start, examine your platform's in-store analytics.

At the minimum, your platform should be able to help you with basic metrics like:

- Unique visitors
- Conversion rate
- Most popular products
- Average revenue per customer

Also take a peek at platform options like in-store site search that could provide you with valuable insights into what your customers are looking for.

It's pretty safe to say that no matter what platform you're on, you should use Google Analytics for your online business.

This will help you understand what the search giant sees happening both inside and outside your store. **Google Analytics** can give you the following insights to help you expand and improve your business:

- Get to know your target audience,

- Track where shoppers come from, where they go, and where they leave,

- Track how your visitors engage with your store, and

- The ability to annotate your efforts.

That last one is my personal favorites. You can tag the important actions or events on your timeline, like adding new products or a sale, so you can see the impact they have on your store.

Analytics in general are a key element in helping you act on facts rather than assumptions about your customers and business.

You're Ready to Launch

Tackle these key areas — site functionality, business basics, and analytics — and you'll have created the solid foundation you need to build out your online store.
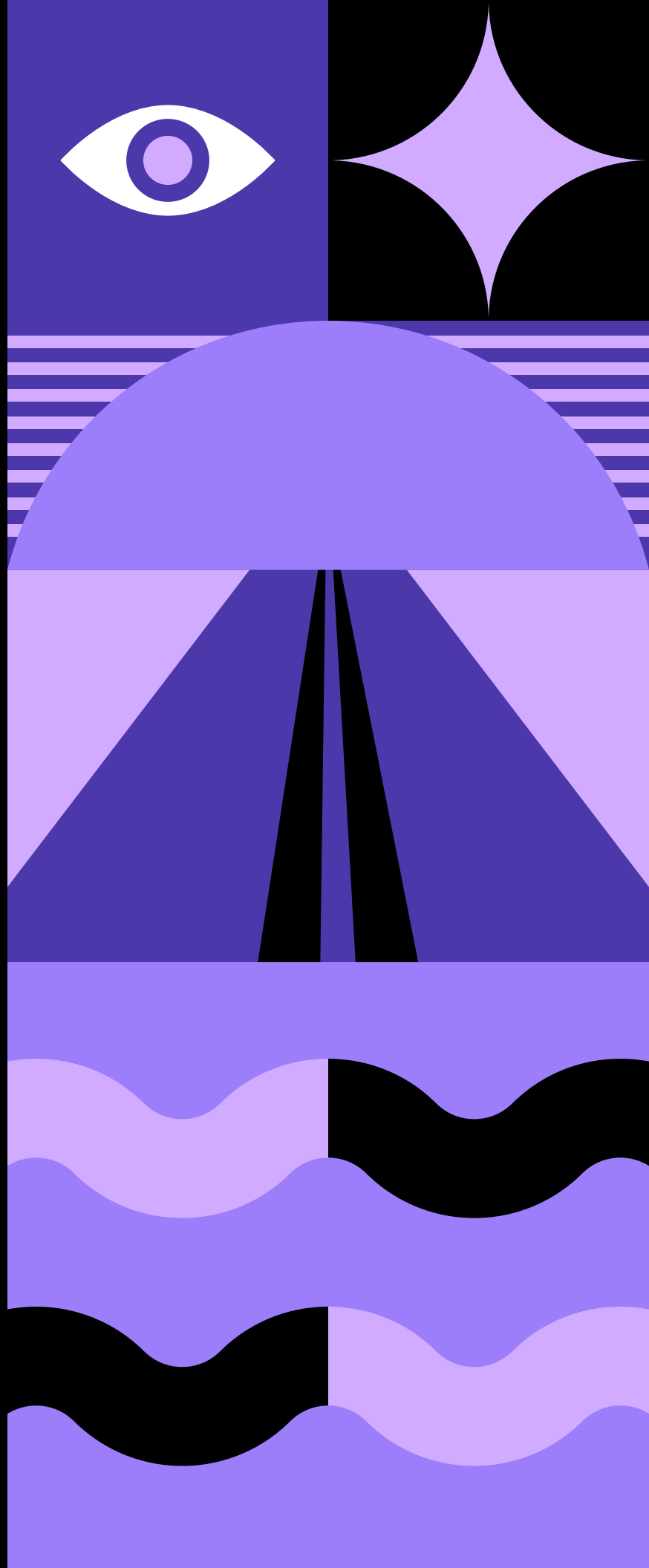
Now, you'll need to read up on how to drive traffic to your online store.

Driving Traffic to Your Online Store

Chapter 10: Driving Traffic to Your Online Store

I hate to be the one to break it to you, but driving traffic to your online store is not as easy as you may think.

In order to set your online business up for success, you'll need to roll out an organized, detailed marketing strategy to drive shoppers to your store.

For some **data-driven perspective**, 33% of clicks from organic search results go to the very first listing on Google — and the highest spenders are more likely to turn to organic search for information.

Worried about a budget? While spending a lot of money on Facebook or Google ads can bring you new leads, in this chapter, we're diving into how you can realistically grow high organic traffic to your store without spending your budget dollars.

With the perfect mix of SEO and social media tactics, the number of new visitors to your store skyrocket when you launch. These strategies will continue to drive more traffic as your business grows.

How To Drive Online Traffic To Your Small Business

When you visit Pinterest and search for 'apple pie recipe', you're bound to find hundreds of recipes, each unique in ingredients and baking time, all yielding the same result: a delicious apple pie.

Think of driving online traffic in the same light. While many brands drive hundreds of thousands of visitors to their website and social media platforms, they all have their own strategy.

You may have common ingredients, like SEO and social media, but no content marketing strategy is equal. Some brands may rely heavier on video whereas others have an award-winning blog. When crafting your marketing strategy to drive online traffic to your small business website, think about your brand and what makes it unique.
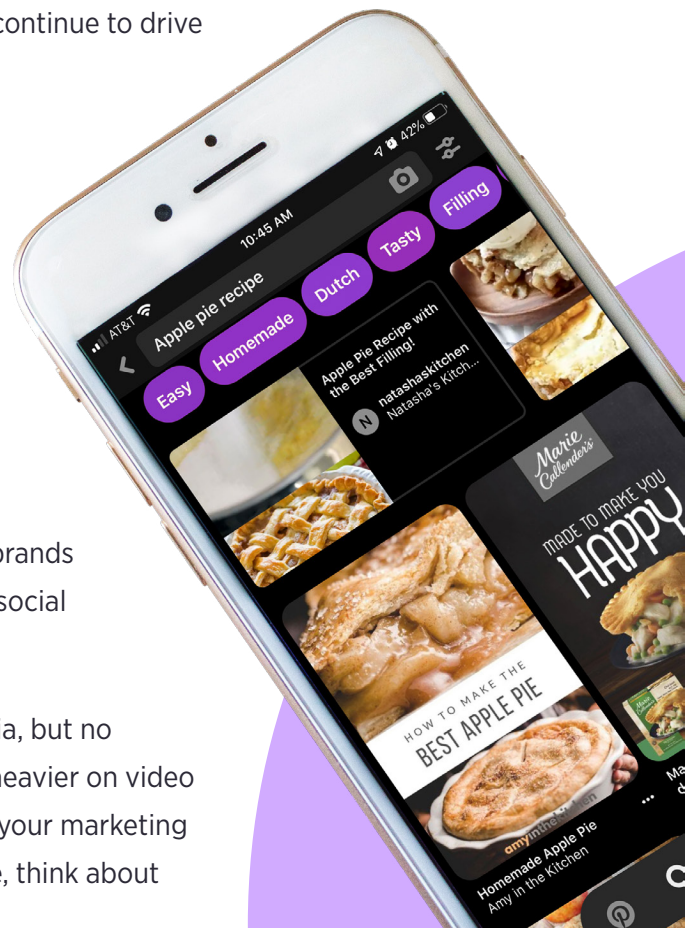
Ask yourself:

- ◢ What type of content resonates with my target audience?

- ◢ On what social media platforms are my target consumers most active?

- ◢ What keywords are most relevant to my business and potential customers?

Here are several ways to grow your website traffic — all of which require little to no money at all.

01 Set up an online presence with social media.

Imagine — you finally launch your online store and the only person who visits is your mom. Worst nightmare, right?

In order to make sure you have traffic from the very start of your business, you'll need to build brand awareness and excitement for your product.

In today's society, **thanks to the increased use of mobile devices and smartphones**, the fastest way to get the word out is via social media. It's also a cost-effective option as it's free to use!

Number of smartphone users in the United States from 2010 to 2023 (in millions)*
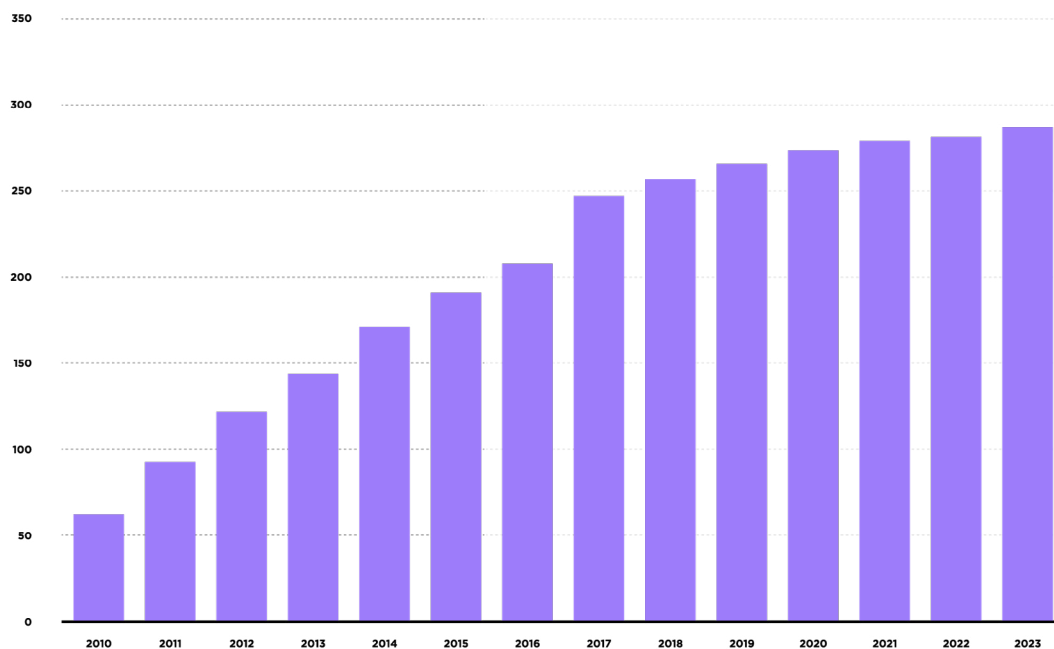
Sources: Statista Digital Market Outlook
©Statista 2019

Additional Information:
United States; eMarketer; Statista Digital Market Outlook; 2010 to 2018; Individuals of any age who own at least one smartphone and use the smartphone(s) at least once per month.

Popular social media platforms include:

1. Instagram
2. LinkedIn
3. Facebook
4. Pinterest
5. and Twitter - just to name a few

Focus your marketing efforts on the platform where your target audience is most active. Instagram is a popular choice for brands targeting the Gen Z and Millennial population.

Before you get too excited about opening a social media account, you'll need high-quality content. Without it, you won't be able to take your online traffic to the next level.

For inspiration, look to competing brands or bloggers and influencers posting about products in your niche. By taking a look at high performing content, you'll get an idea of how to position your brand and your products in the social space.

Social media marketing is a powerful component to driving online traffic because it allows you to directly engage with your customers. So while you drive traffic to your website (e.g. homepage, a specific landing page, or other web pages), you simultaneously build a community for your customers.

Jeni's Ice Cream is a great example of successful social media marketing. By delivering high quality content mixed with snapshots from their customer base, Jeni's creates a dedicated and engaged audience.

Over time, your social media built community will grow and be a home for customers to ask questions, discover new products, learn your brand messaging, and so much more.

If you know how to engage with you audience well, you'll see a healthy trend of growth.

Take a new approach to email marketing.

02 Another way to drive traffic to your store is by building your email newsletter list and leveraging email marketing to communicate to your customers.

On your website's homepage, you'll want to make sure customers have an option to enter their contact information to subscribe to your e-newsletter.

Collecting an email list is one task — the next is creating an eye-catching, value-adding newsletter. You can choose at what cadence you send emails, but we recommend scaling your cadence over time, ultimately aiming for a goal of at least one email newsletter per week.

Here are some ideas of content to include in your email marketing and e-newsletters:

- If you have a local business, be sure to use your newsletter to spread the news about in-person events.

- If you're big on blogging, include 1-3 of your most recent posts.

- Announce upcoming promotions (with a specific campaign link or promotional code, so you know customers came from your email newsletter).

- Educate new customers on your loyalty program or offer newbie incentives.

- Share high-performing content from your social networks.

- Automate abandoned cart notifications.

Don't underestimate the power of email marketing as it can have a seriously positive effect on your ecommerce conversion rates and, ultimately, help you grow your business.

Here are a few inspiring examples of successful email marketing.
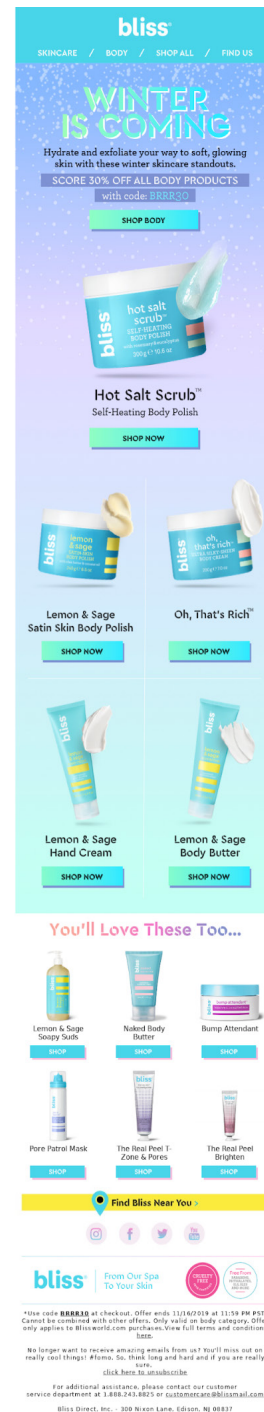
Pink Lily Boutique.

With a direct call-to-actions and a promotional call-out, Pink Lily immediately catches the eyes of their customers.

Bliss.

Helping their customers brave the chillier season, Bliss pushes promotional offers for their seasonally fitting products.

03   Utilize SEO resources.

Search engine rankings are a big deal for small businesses trying to build online traffic.

The average person completes a Google search **3-4 times per day**.

While other search engines - like Bing - are still important to your SEO strategy, **Google owns more than 95% of the search engine market share** - making it a top search engine optimization priority for many small business owners.

In order to make sure you rank for key terms in your niche, you'll want to focus on:

- Your domain name

- Using a keyword tool, like Clearscope, when creating content

- Analyzing SEO performance on Google Analytics

- And, if you want to put budget toward it, studying your pay-per-click (PPC) and campaign performance in Google Adwords

By monitoring your SEO performance, you can get a full view of where you need to optimize your site. If you are custom designing your website, work with a web designer to see where and how you can optimize components of your website for SEO.

04   Leverage your promotional strategy.

Everyone loves a great sale.

Seriously - for Millennials and Gen Z, the **#1 incentive to purchase is a sale or promotion**.

So, how exactly do you integrate promotions into your online marketing strategy? What's the right balance?

Instead of thinking about sales as a promotional strategy, start thinking of it as a value strategy.

In 2020, consumers want to know they are getting more value for their spend. There are a few ways in which you can do this:

- Go the traditional route and offer discounts and coupons, optimizing on major retail holidays like Black Friday and Cyber Monday

- Launch a tiered loyalty program where customers gain access to exclusive content, sales, or freebie products the more they purchase

◢   Create bundles and kits - where customers save money by purchasing select products together

For small business marketing, it's important to evaluate each of these options and determine if they are truly viable for your business. At the end of the day, you are aiming to create a profitable business, so be wary of offering too many promotions.

05 Local marketing.

Did you know that, on average, brands see a **45% increase in online traffic** after launching a brick-and-mortar store?

With that said, it's no surprise that more brands are taking their experiences offline - whether it be opening a permanent retail location or hosting 'pop-ups' or offline events.

Local marketing has continued to evolve as society has shifted to an experience-driven world.

For example, **Burrow**, a direct-to-consumer furniture brand, has two partner showrooms where customers can experience their products in real life. Plus, they use their retail locations to host in-person events, cultivating the customer community they've worked hard to build via their digital marketing strategies.

*Image Source: **Burrow***

Maybe you don't have the resources to launch a brick-and-mortar store or a pop-up spot. There are so many other ways to leverage local marketing.

The easiest? Use social media! This free to use tool can work wonders. It's quite simple - when you post content, tag a location. This way, the algorithm will include your posts to those who are in that area. This exposes you to a whole new group of potential customers.

To add another layer, if you're interested in working with influencers, hosting an influencer trip can also be a great way to leverage local marketing. Think about what market or city you'd like to tap into - and plan a trip there! Not only will you gain traffic from working with influencers, but you'll expose your small business to potential customers in the city you chose to go to. However, keep in mind that this option can be fairly expensive.

Third, pay attention to local SEO opportunities. Depending on your business, this can vary. If you have a brick-and-mortar location, make sure you appear in Google Maps. If you don't have an offline presence, create a location for your business! Capitalizing on where your business is from can add a personal touch and result in local pride for your brand.

The narrative for local marketing is shifting to a world where experiences are given the most priority. Capitalize on how you can bring a special experience to your customers - and where you'd like to see your business go.

06 Tap into your connections.

This might seem like a simple step, but tapping into your network can create a ripple effect, expanding your brand awareness to new horizons.

When you're preparing to launch your online business, spread the news with your connections! This could be sharing by word-of-mouth, on social media (like LinkedIn), or sending an email to your family and friends.

Be sure to provide your connections with information about your small business that can generate some online traffic. This could be providing them with:

- ◢ Your website's domain name
- ◢ Your social media accounts
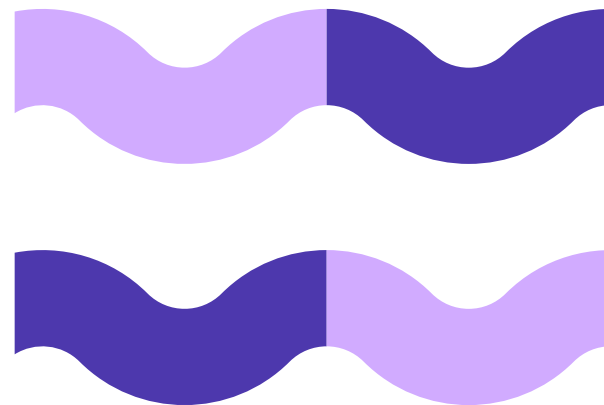
◢ A hashtag to share on social media

◢ A catalog highlighting your products

◢ Or even a media kit - highlighting your company's mission and vision

In addition, attend local networking events in the niche that your company resides. Bring a business card with your name, website domain name, and contact information to hand out to potential customers or partners.

You can find local networking events on:

◢ **Meetup**

◢ **Eventbrite**

◢ **Facebook** groups

◢ And more

Spreading the word directly to your connections adds an element of personalization and gives you the opportunity to speak to your brand.

Best part? Speaking to your connections won't cost you a penny.

07 Create a buzz.

Your social media presence, email list, and website traffic are all on the rise. Now is the perfect time to create more buzz around your brand.

Yes - it's time to tap into the world of public relations.

You have a crafted story to tell, but how do you get it out there?

Write a press release or blog post that you can pitch to local newspapers and magazines - or even create pitches to be featured on your local news or radio station.

When creating these pieces of content to share, be sure to include:

- ◢ Your brand name

- ◢ Vision, mission and purpose

- ◢ Product assortment

- ◢ Statistics

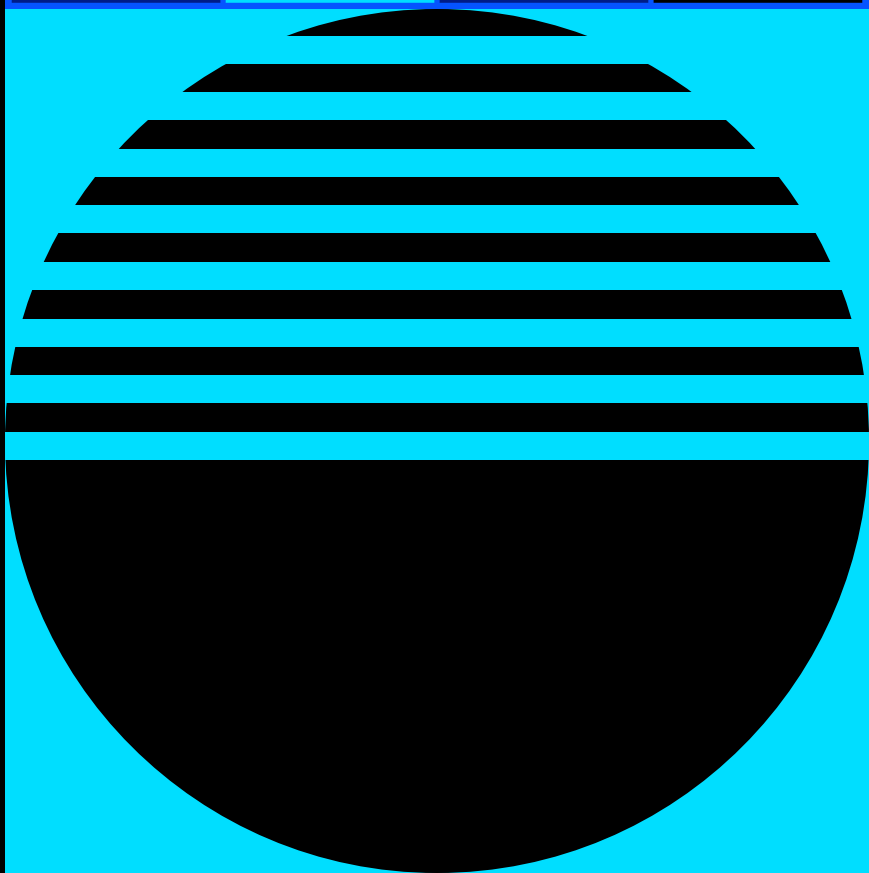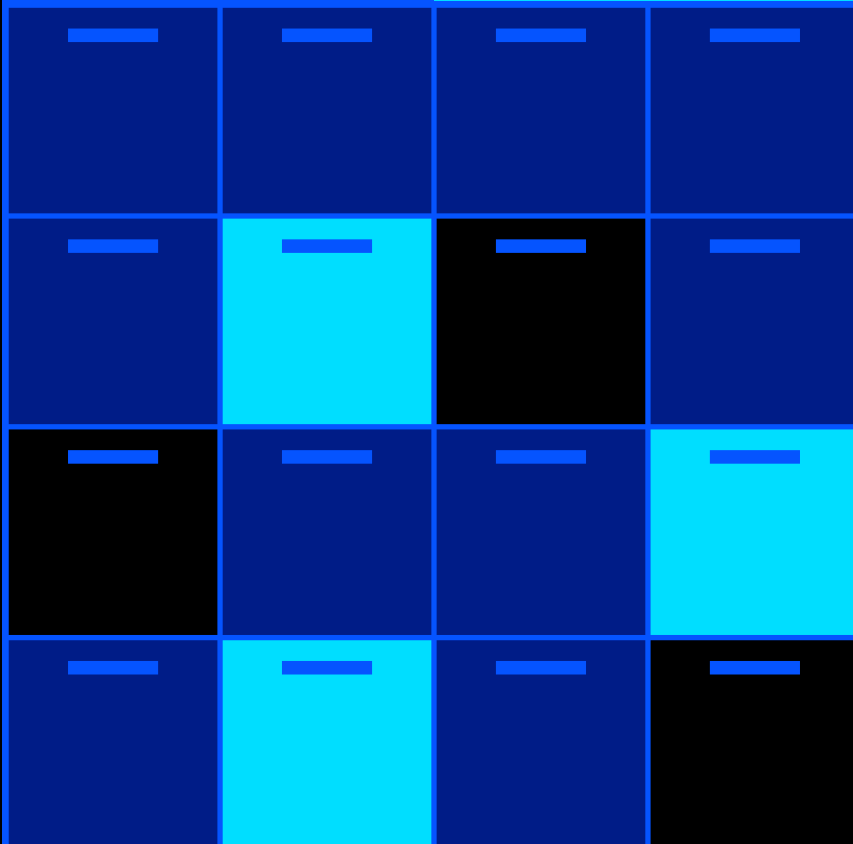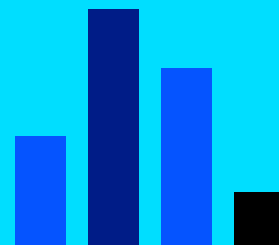- ◢ Where customers can find your store (e.g. offline location, upcoming event, website)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, **leveraging influencers** is another great way to create buzz around your products.

In the next chapter, we'll explore how to measure your success and what key performance indicators (KPIs) are essential to your business.

Small Business Shipping, Fulfillment & Returns

Chapter 11: Small Business Shipping, Fulfillment & Returns

How you manage small business shipping, fulfillment, and returns can make or break your business.

In the Amazon Prime age, consumers are demanding products faster than ever. Plus, they have high expectations as to how their product arrives and what kind of **"unboxing" experience** they have.

To top it off, customers are requesting more transparency in the supply chain — putting fulfillment processes in the spotlight.

And, of course, consumers rely on the comfort that they can easily return a product if they are unsatisfied with it.

We know shipping is a vital component of any small business, but with all the options available, it can be overwhelming to know which route to take.

Good news: we're here to give you the pros and cons, and answer your what ifs for all of your options, surrounding topics like:

- The cost of ecommerce shipping
- Common return policies and processes
- How to determine what to charge your customers
- Packaging and branding best practices
- Creating a shipping strategy
- Popular shipping tools

Shipping Cost 101

Before you set up shipping rates and methods in your shopping cart, you need to understand how your shipping and fulfillment costs are calculated.
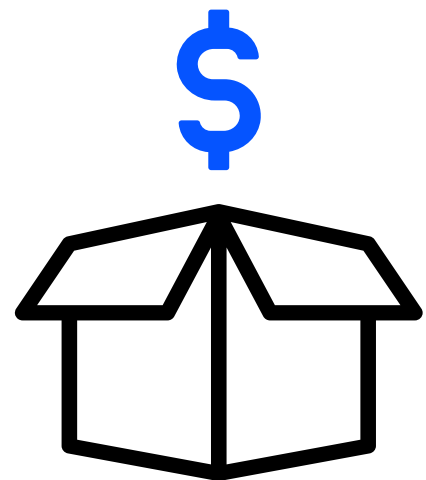
Shipping costs are calculated based on:

1. Service and speed

2. Dimension and weight

3. Destination

4. Shipping volume

Service and speed.

Thanks to industry giants — like Amazon — the vast majority of consumers expect a shorter delivery time and many shipping options. The caveat? They **want it to be free**.

As a rule of thumb, the more you expedite a shipping service, the higher the shipping rate will be. But, expedited services aren't the only factor affecting your total cost.

Carriers offer a multitude of services based on many factors, so there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Mapping the right service to the right request is crucial for cost-effective shipping.

Here are the main questions you'll need to ask yourself when it comes to shipping a product:

- When does the package need to arrive?

- Is a guaranteed delivery or delivery commitment required?

- Is tracking required?

- Is the recipient address commercial or residential?

- Is signature confirmation or any other service add-on required?

- Are you shipping alcohol, other specialized products, or any hazardous materials?

Understanding your products' shipping requirements will give you a clearer picture of how to estimate your shipping costs.

Dimension and weight.

Just like expedited shipping, larger and heavier parcels also add to cost.

Carriers and services may have different restrictions, rating structures, and requirements — but they all calculate shipping cost based on weight and dimension.

Without a **multi-carrier rate calculator**, comparing rates can be very tedious and annoying.

But that doesn't mean it has to be. Let's break it down:

FedEx, USPS, and UPS charge based on dimensional weight (DIM) for their services.

Dimensional weight is based on the package size rather than its actual weight. Basically, you'll be charged more for large light parcels and less for smaller, heavier parcels.

To determine the best rate, always make sure you enter your package dimensions. You can calculated DIM by following this equation: (Length x Width x Height) / Divisor.

Spoiler alert: the higher the divisor is, the lower the rate will be.

Here are the Dimensional Weight formulas for UPS, FedEx, and United States Postal Service (USPS):

CARRIER	DOMESTIC FORMULA
UPS	LxWxH 139
FedEx ®	LxWxH 139
UNITED STATES POSTAL SERVICE.	LxWxH 166
*cheapest	

With this option, you'll select a carrier-provided, standard packaging. You'll pay the same rate, regardless of weight and destination (as long as its domestic).

For a quick lay of the land:

- ◢ USPS and UPS flat rate boxes generally allow up to 70 lbs

- ◢ FedEx One Rate boxes go up to 50 lbs

Then, there's cubic pricing.

The way this works is if you ship a small, heavy parcel, it will not be charged at the same rate as a larger parcel of the same weight. USPS offers cubic pricing for Priority Mail shipments.

For items under 20 lbs, this is how to determine an eligible cubic rate:

(Length x Width x Height) / 1728 = Cubic Feet

This amount then falls into 5 categories ranging from 0.1 to 0.5 cubic feet.

If you qualify for full cubic pricing, **click here** to see the rates.

Distance.

The final factor that impacts shipping cost is the distance between the shipper's address and the recipient address.
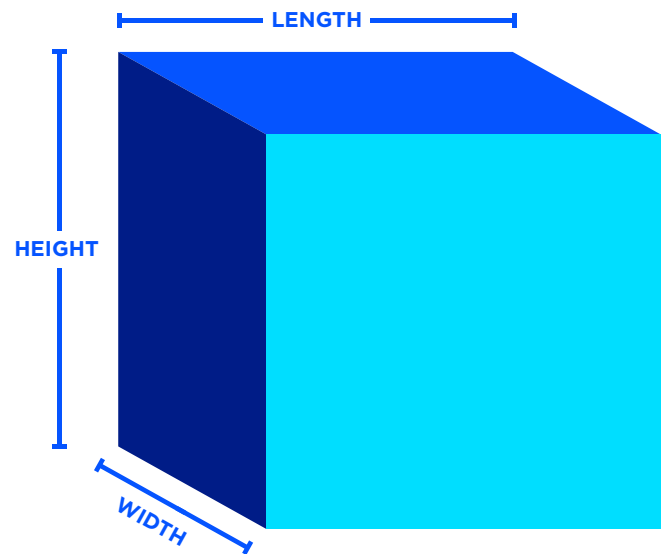
Carriers base their domestic rates on zones.

The most common zone system in the U.S. is USPS, but UPS and FedEx also measure distance based on zones.

Finding the zones specific to your ship-from location for each carrier can be difficult. This is where using a multi-carrier rate calculator will save you a lot of time and hassle.

If you're looking to ship to international destinations, here are just a few things to keep in mind:

Confirm product shippability.
There are certain **products that are forbidden** from entering some countries. For instance, it is illegal to ship playing cards to Brazil. And you can't ship collectible stamps to France.

Additional taxes, duties, and documentation.
While these don't exactly count as carrier fees, shipping internationally will introduce additional charges and requirements like Value Added Tax, duties and tariffs, and customs declarations.

Update your shipping policy and pricing.
Selling internationally is more expensive, so make sure that you've taken the appropriate steps to charge and estimate for delivery for your international customers.

For additional international information, check out **ShipStation's guide**.

Managing Your Shipping Volume

Just like you prefer high-frequency, loyal customers, so do carrier companies.

Shipping at a higher volume can lead to volume-based negotiated rates with these carriers.

When you're getting started, establish a relationship with your carrier account manager, as this can expose your business to greater benefits — like shipping discounts.

Most online retailers use multiple carriers to match the best carrier, service, and rates to fit their business needs — so don't be shy to research different options.

Shipping software can help make this process easier with all carriers and rates readily available on one platform.

Saving on Additional Shipping Costs

PACKAGING

Carriers will frequently offer complimentary packaging. But also consider insulation and cushioning, inserts, custom boxes, and envelopes. We'll cover packaging and branding a little later, but be sure to incorporate it into your cost calculations.

INSURANCE

Most service levels from the main carriers have a default insurance value:

- FedEx and UPS generally have a default value of $100, with some exceptions.

- USPS Priority Mail Express shipments include up to $100 of insurance.

- Priority Mail shipments may include up to $50.

THIRD-PARTY INSURANCE

Should you need more coverage, third-party insurance providers like Shipsurance offer competitive rates over carrier charges. Typically, carriers charge between $0.75–0.85 per $100 value, with a minimum cost of roughly $2.50. Shipsurance, however, only charges $0.55 per $100, and includes no minimum cost.

Managing Returns

Even the most popular and highly rated products on earth get returned.

Returns are an inevitable part of an online business. But, it's how you manage returns that make or break for a successful one.

Did you know that a majority of customers **look at your returns policy** before making a purchase?

A purchase decision is a risk-reward decision. Buying online involves more risk, because you don't physically get to hold the product or inspect it.

Having a customer-focused returns policy reduces this risk for the customer. When you offer a great returns policy and experience, shoppers are more likely to become repeat customers.

ShipStation users who give their customers access to **ShipStation's Branded Returns Portal** saw a 16% increase in average order volume (AOV). And customers were 29% more likely to shop again from the merchant.

A quick note for merchants selling internationally:

International returns may be more expensive and time-consuming, and you could incur another round of duties and tariffs.

If you sell to international customers, make sure your returns policy has explicit, clear, and transparent communication on how you handle returns.
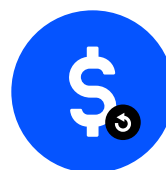
Depending on the item value, you may simply want to offer a refund or send a replacement without requesting that the item be returned.

How Much Should I Charge my Customers for Shipping?

Now that you know what goes into the cost of shipping, you have a decision to make: what will you charge your customers for shipping?

Every business wants to save on margins while staying competitive and attractive to customers.

The right choice depends on your business needs, and you may select different methods for different scenarios.

Free shipping.

Whether you like it or not, we have the era of Amazon Prime free 2-day shipping to thank for this phenomenon.

There are ample studies and surveys that stress shipping costs are among the top factors driving shopping cart abandonment. But we understand you have to protect your profit margins.

While shorter delivery times are becoming more popular, many customers are still willing to wait longer when offered **free shipping**.

This means you can select more cost-effective shipping services. Studies also show customers are willing to **add products to their shopping cart** to get free shipping when there is a minimum price that must be met.

For instance, "Free shipping for orders over $75." This means you can increase your sales and average basket size if you set a free shipping threshold.

If the parcel is under 16 ounces, USPS First Class Mail offers the best rates. Beyond that, USPS Priority Mail will frequently offer the best rates for parcels up to 10 lbs.

> **Amazon has changed the game around consumer expectations for both delivery times as well as costs. Brands should test out pricing strategies that include the ability to support some sort of free shipping tier to drive real growth. Consumers will often pay a few extra dollars for a product that can be here sooner and has "free shipping" (even if the true cost of that shipping was just actually baked into the product)."**

— ADAM GROHS, CO-FOUNDER/CEO, **PARTICULAR**.

FLAT RATE SHIPPING.

If you're not able to offer free shipping, flat rate shipping is a good alternative.

With a simple preparation and analysis of your average shipping costs, you can offer a set amount for different service levels.

This works well if your parcels are generally similar in size and shipping rate.

The shipping rate may fluctuate slightly, but it evens out in the end if you have consistent shipping rates for your parcels.

This is especially true if you can use services like USPS Priority Flat Rate in a cost-effective way.

REAL-TIME RATES.

This option may be particularly appealing for oversized items, specialized products, and B2B businesses.

BigCommerce merchants can set up real-time shipping quotes. This means you, the merchant, have less risk of under or overcharging your customers for shipping, resulting in more consumer trust.

Packaging and Branding

Another important part of the shipping and fulfillment process is packaging.

We mentioned it in the section about the cost of shipping, but here again is an opportunity to look at the shipping process not just as a cost center. Remember, this is where loyal and repeat customers are born and bred.

When you sell on marketplaces like Amazon, your packaging must adhere to certain criteria: unbranded or carrier-branded packaging, no inserts, and more.

But when you sell from your store, you can make your mark. Especially in ecommerce, since your packaging is such a physical touchpoint for your customer. Reinforce your brand and deliver on your customers' expectations.

A recent survey found that **40% of customers regularly post interesting packaging** or unboxing videos on social media — spreading brand awareness like wildfire.

Create custom shipping boxes with Arka or add an extra touch like branded tissue paper from companies like noissue. Customize where you can with logos on shipping labels, packing slips, and more to create a memorable unboxing experience.

You can be as creative as you want. We've seen merchants add stickers, handwritten notes, and other items to orders. **Branding your shipping** is an essential part of making an online purchase tangible.
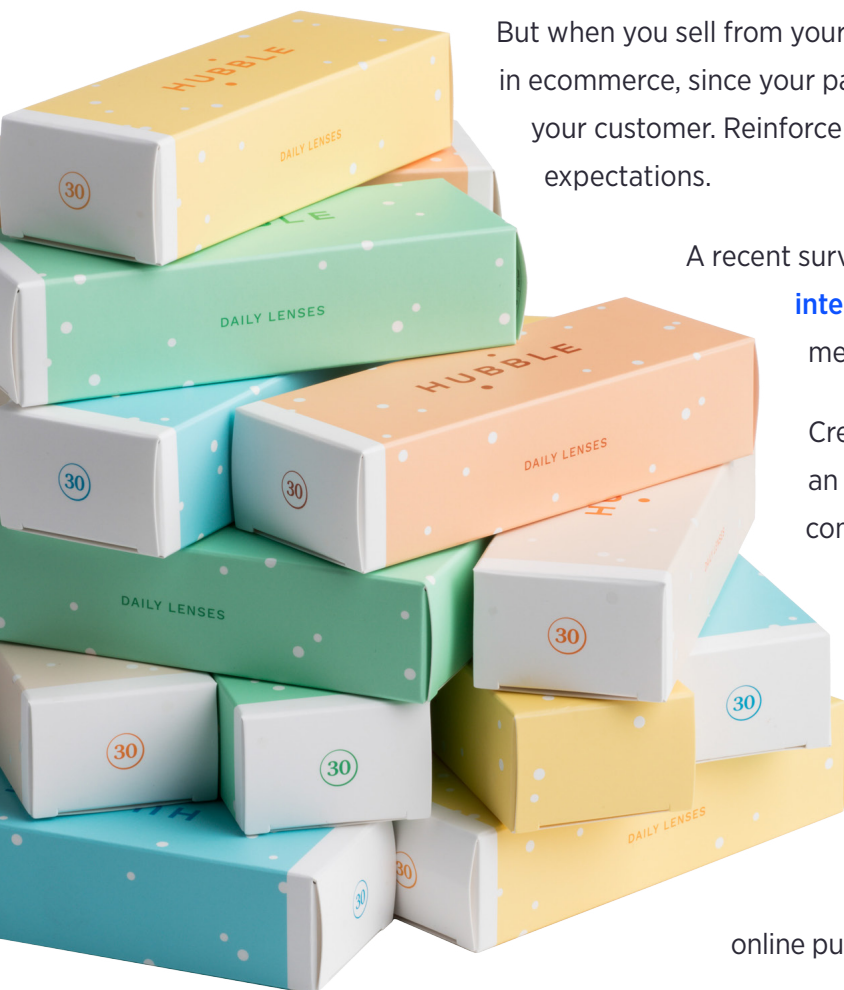
> **"** Fulfillment matters. As ad costs continue to go up, it becomes increasingly important each day to thrill and wow your customers. This means shipping quickly. This means adding things into your fulfillment kit that your customer never expected, e.g., a branded koozie, a handwritten note, a get-started guide, and much more. This all can lead to better retention. Furthermore, if you look at brands that grow faster, they often focus on what the outside and inside materials look like. At Hunt A Killer, for example, we brand the outside of the box just like Freshly, Blue Apron, and several other brands. Having just an extra touch of branding can make you more memorable for your customers. Fulfillment is not a place where you want to cut corners."
>
> — ERIC CARLSON, CO-FOUNDER, SWEATPANTS AGENCY

Your Small Business Shipping Strategy

At this point, we've covered some of the main components of your shipping process: what goes into your shipping costs, what you should charge your customers, and how to approach shipping and packaging from a customer experience perspective.

You're well on your way toward becoming a shipping expert.

If we bookend **the fulfillment process**, it really boils down to two things: your orders from wherever you sell to your shipping however you ship.

01 **Wherever you sell: multi-channel.**

While merchants find success selling on their own website or a single primary channel, what can really move the needle is implementing a multi-channel strategy.

When we looked at numbers from **users selling on multiple channels**, we found that a simple rule holds true: the more channels you add, the more you sell.

Do a little bit of market research and understand the strengths and pitfalls of marketplaces like

Amazon, eBay, and Walmart to find the opportunity that is right for you.

Most marketplaces place stringent requirements and criteria on their sellers, so you'll want to ask yourself, "Can I manage their requirements?"

Online marketplaces can play an important role in your business. But, make sure you stay on top of your shipping strategy to effectively manage multi-channel order sources.

02 However you ship: multi-carrier.

Just like diversifying your order sources, expanding your portfolio of available shipping services is important.

The key to finding the best shipping solution to serve your specific business needs is to mix and match your carriers.

Each carrier has unique strengths and weaknesses, and selecting the best shipping method should factor in far more than just the lowest rate.

More guaranteed delivery times and better carrier-provided insurance can help save you money in the event of failed or damaged deliveries.

Taking it a step further, when you're negotiating discounted rates, consider shipping 10-30% of your parcels through a secondary carrier. Doing so will give you another avenue to negotiate deals, giving you the opportunity to benefit from more discounts.

03 Outsourcing your shipping and fulfillment management.

For many small business owners, you're managing every step of your fulfillment process.

This control has many benefits in how you manage the bottom line and your customer experiences. But this control can also be an intensive process.

If you're looking to expand your shipping and fulfillment management, there are two options you should consider: third-party logistics (3PL) and dropshipping.
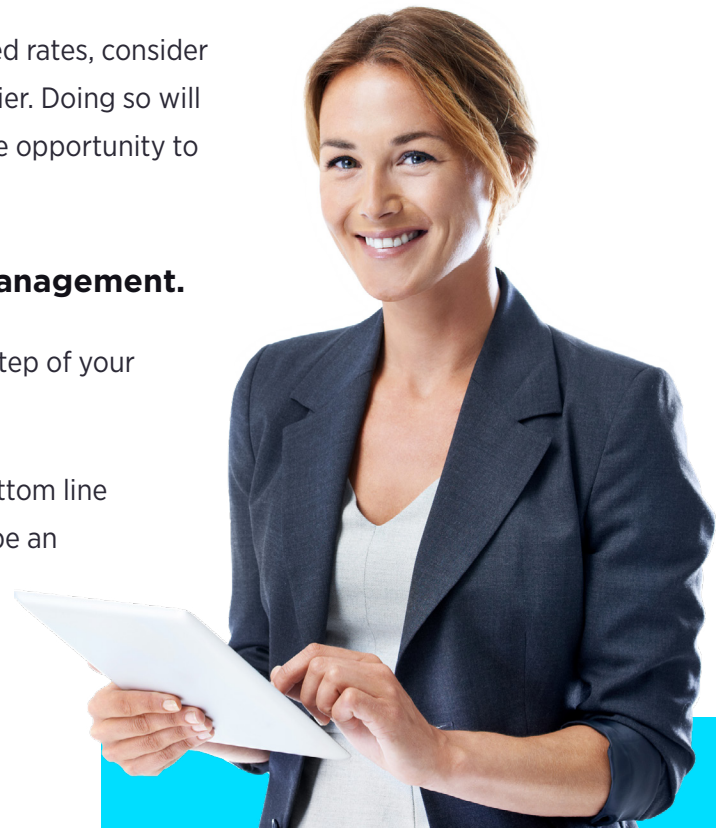
Outsourcing your warehousing and fulfillment process can be a great option for your business.

Let's start with 3PLs — sure, you will relinquish some control, and you'll definitely incur additional costs, but you can have a third-party logistics provider store your product and then pick, pack, and ship your orders on your behalf.

Amazon is an industry standard for this.

With **Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA)**, you **pay Amazon** to keep your products in its warehouses, as well as fulfill and ship your orders.

FBA works for orders through Amazon as well as through different selling channels, like your BigCommerce storefront.

Once the order has shipped, Amazon will send you the tracking number and shipment status.

Third-party logistics can be used for all of your products or just a portion of them. **Learn more on when to outsource your shipping with partners like ShipBob**.

Then, there's option #2. Rather than owning and housing your own inventory, you may simply send your orders to a manufacturer or supplier that fulfills orders as they come in. **This is called dropshipping**.

Dropshipping has gained popularity in recent years since it gives you the ability to sell a product without owning or ever even touching the inventory.

You don't need to stock, package, or ship the product, and you get a cut of the profits for selling.

With this low-risk opportunity, however, comes **low rewards**. The related costs can lower your profit margins, so keep an eye on the cost of acquisition for your sales.

There's no one-size-fits-all solution to shipping, and you don't have to exclusively use a third-party fulfillment company or do everything in-house.

Researching the options available to your business will help you decide the best way to get your products to your customers' doorsteps.

04   Shipping Software.

What if I told you that integrating a shipping solution could lower costs, improve shipping margins, and grow your bottom line?

Businesses big and small should focus on creating easy shipping workflows to save time on operations. Here are a few ways shipping software can accomplish this:

- Access to one dashboard where you can compare rates, print labels, manage orders, print shipping labels in bulk, and reconcile shipping bills.

- Set shipping rules to automatically select the cheapest rate, fastest method, and more.

When you use a shipping software, you are able to offer your shoppers a better shipping experience to improve conversion and build brand loyalty.

How does this affect brand loyalty? Shipping software can give your customers direct line of sight to the true cost of shipping by displaying accurate, real-time rates at checkout. Plus, you can offer multiple shipping options to customers, so they can choose the method that works best for them.

In the end, most time is saved with the right shipping software.

You need a software with robust integrations on both the selling channel as well as carrier side, strong automation features for maximum efficiency, and support for the right tools like thermal printers, scales, and barcode scanners mentioned above.

5 Ways Small Businesses Can Save Money on Shipping

We've covered costs of shipping, managing returns, and shipping technology, but what if I told you there are still more ways you can save your bottom dollar?

Here are some easy-to-follow tips for creating a highly efficient and low-cost shipping and fulfillment strategy.

01 Research different carriers.

We mentioned the importance of researching the costs and factors associated with different carriers and services earlier in this chapter — but, we're here to reiterate how impactful it can be to your upfront cost.

Just like purchasing a car, you visit many dealerships, do extensive online research, and even wait until a seasonal sale to complete your purchase.

Look at your shipping solution similarly.

Do online research (like reading this guide) to understand the shipping options available, connect with carriers and establish relationships, and negotiate contracted discounts or implement a hybrid shipping strategy using both in-house and 3PL or dropshipping services.

This is a piece of your ecommerce strategy that you'll want to plan from the start.

02 Automate your shipping.

Using a shipping software will not only save you time, but money.

By automating shipping, you can always guarantee the best rate, and you'll free up human resources — so you can spend more time working on your marketing and online strategies.

03 Offer free shipping with a minimum order.

Not ready to dive into free shipping? We understand.

As a small business, it's essential that you set yourself up for success — not lost margins.

A great cost-effective way to offer free shipping is by coupling it with a minimum order value.

You can perform A/B testing to understand what value threshold moves the needle for your customer base. Maybe it's free shipping for orders over $50 or $100.

Not only will you save on shipping costs by implementing an order minimum threshold, but you'll also learn more about your customers and what drives their conversion.
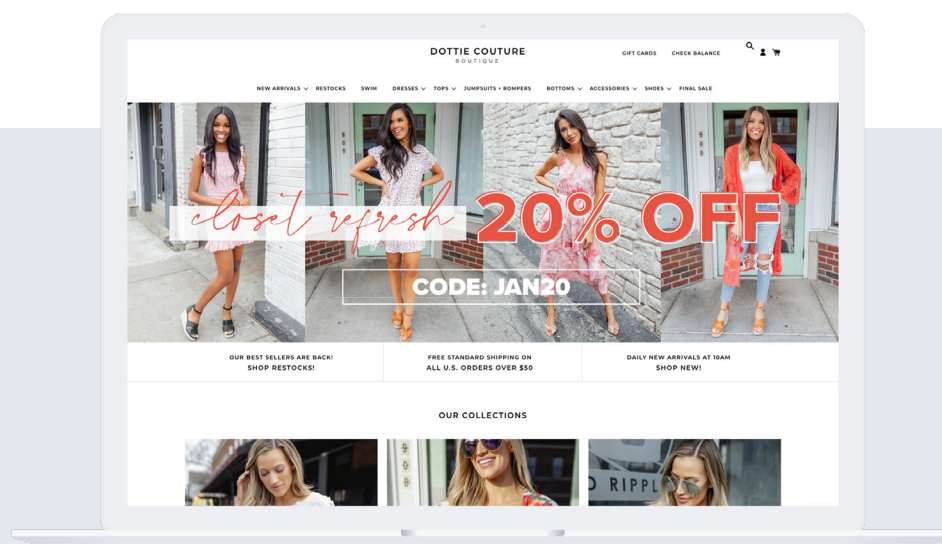
04 Take advantage of flat rate shipping.

It's hard to swallow when an order that only contains one product costs the same to ship as an order that contains five.

Depending on the average order value and items per order — you may consider taking advantage of flat rate shipping.

The best part? You'll never have to worry about buying boxes or going to the post office. When ordered online, USPS flat rate boxes come in packages of 10 and 25 — and these shipments can be auto-scheduled online.

05 Reduce, reuse, recycle.

Not only will your customers be excited to hear you have an initiative to give back to the planet — but reducing your shipping material and footprint can mean big savings for your business.

There are many ways you can give back to the planet and to your wallet.

- Use a shipping software to automate shipping management and orders for supplies — reducing your total supply inventory to only what you need.

- Reuse shipping material from returned orders — if it's still in good condition — or find a local recycling center that accepts or distributes recycled shipping materials.

- Encourage customers to recycle shipping materials.

We've walked you through everything you need to know to get started with efficient ecommerce shipping for your business.

Focus on creating a cost-effective and customer-centric fulfillment experience that can drive loyalty and repeat purchases.

Don't think of shipping as a cost center for your business.

Look at it as an extension of your brand and customer experience.

Do it right, and you may even transform shipping into a competitive advantage to grow and scale your business.

Measuring Success: Analytics
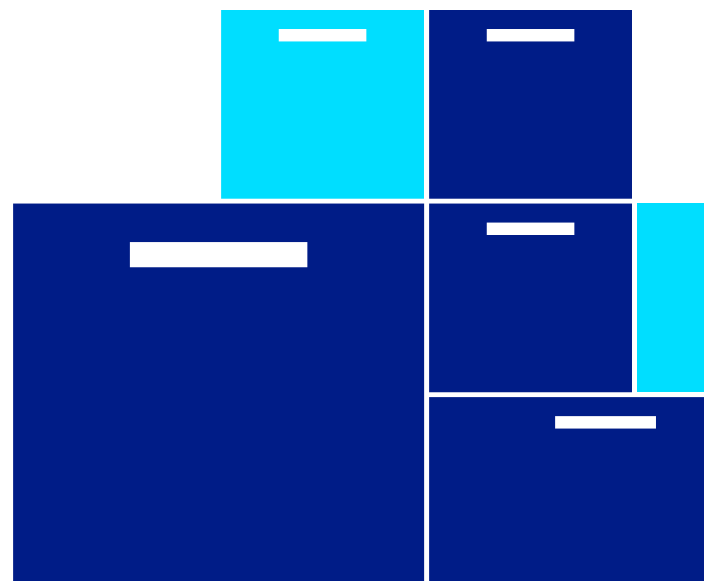
Chapter 12: Measuring Success: Analytics

Success is nothing without a way to measure it.

Studying important metrics — like conversion rate, click-through rates, average time on your website, page views, and number of visits — can provide your online business with rich information about your ecommerce features, customer behavior, and what's working and what's missing the mark.

Every business is unique — which means the metrics you track will be, too.

In this chapter, we're going to dive into the value of measuring your online success, which **key performance indicators** may be of value to your business, and how to track and study the results.
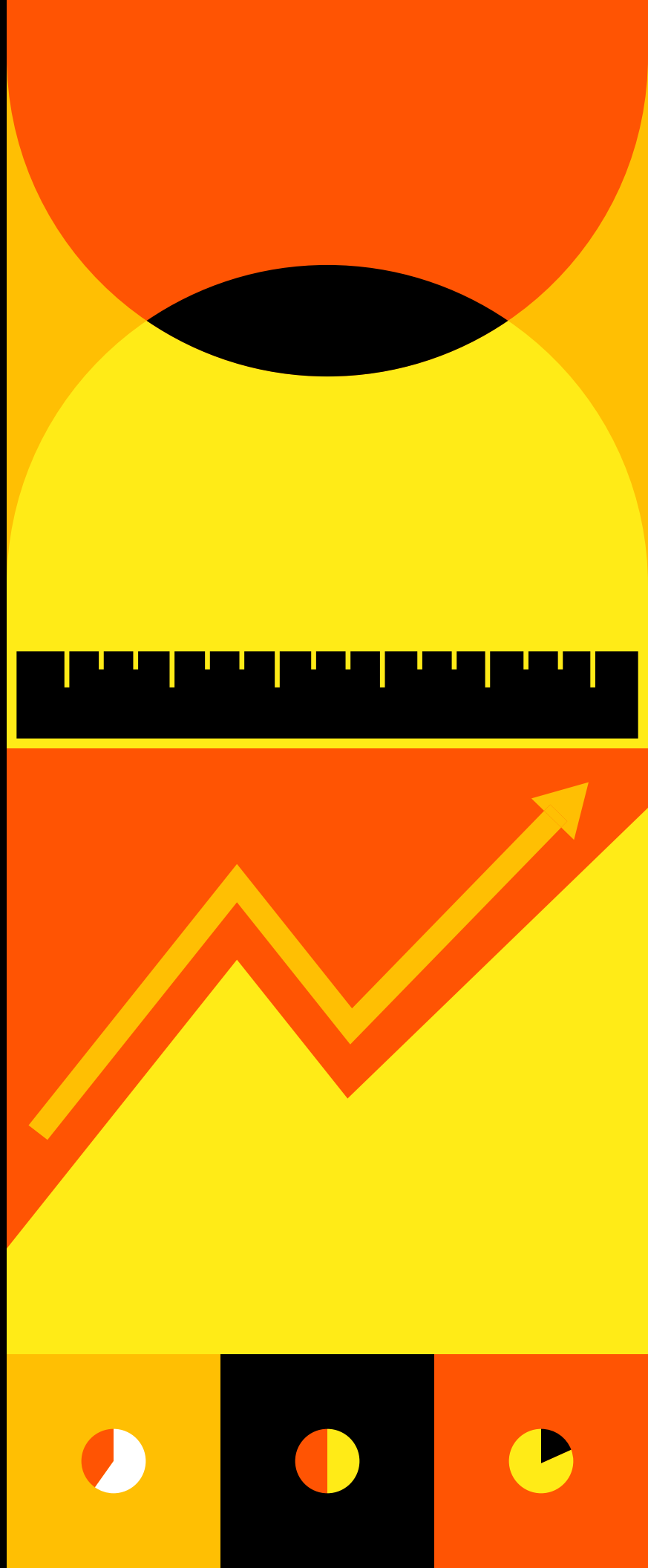
Why You Should Measure Your Online Success

Bottom line: success is nothing without the numbers to prove it.

Measuring your ecommerce and marketing metrics can teach you a lot about how you run your business — and help identify areas for opportunity.

Here are a few benefits to having an analytics strategy for your business.

Provide a stronger pitch to investors.

01

Imagine you're pitching your business on Shark Tank and you present with no numbers or data about your success. Sharks like Barbara Corcoran and Mark Cuban aren't going to bite.

Having strong results behind your business is a key indicator for potential growth. Plus, the more specific your data, the more insight you'll get into where and how investors can help you grow, such as by expanding to new marketing channels or capitalizing on areas to amp up your return on investment (ROI).

02 **Monitor results in real-time.**

For online marketing analysts, a simple look at an analytics dashboard can tell them when a landing page is down or when a rush of new visitors come to your website.

Tools like Google Analytics offer a real-time view and customized options to create a daily dashboard. This is also a feature available on ecommerce platforms like BigCommerce.

By collecting data and monitoring your results in real time, you can quickly correct or adjust your website or marketing strategy based on the activity that's occurring.

This will help you find problems before they become too complex, and so you can optimize your customer experience earlier and inevitably keep your customers happier.

03 A holistic outlook.

When looking at key metrics for your online business — whether it be for an online marketing campaign or overall performance — they tend to paint a story.

Maybe you find that your business has great organic search traffic. This could be an indicator to continue driving your search engine optimization (SEO) strategy.

Maybe you're seeing an exponential amount of new customers. This could be an indicator that your inbound marketing strategies - perhaps social media - is high performing.

Or — maybe you're driving a lot of visits with potential customers who aren't converting. This could be a sign that you need to take a new approach to ecommerce site merchandising or traditional marketing strategies.

Paying attention to what story your data is telling you can be a strong driver for future opportunity.

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) to Include in Your Online Marketing Strategy

Data can give us a lot of information — sometimes too much to easily digest.

Understanding what key performance indicators (KPIs) to track is dependent on your business and what tactics you're rolling out.

Popular KPIs to track for an online business include:

- Website traffic.
- New visitors and returning visitors.
- Conversion rate.
- Bounce rate.
- Referral traffic.
- Click-through-rate (CTR).
- Pay-per-click (PPC).
- Pageviews.
- Average time spent on your site (or specific landing page).
- Average order value.
- Site speed.
- And more.

Generally speaking, there are three buckets of KPIs to consider.

01 Ecommerce data.

Small business owners need to understand their ecommerce website data for various reasons:

- To ensure their ecommerce platform is performing,
- To understand customer journeys, and
- To learn what site content or merchandising is performing best.

Here are a few ecommerce KPIs and why they're valuable:

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT MEASURES	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
SALES	Total number of sales by the hour, day, week, month, quarter, or year.	Monitoring sales will indicate growth and seasonal trends — and can help you plan your inventory for high-traffic periods.
AVERAGE ORDER VALUE (AOV)	How much a customer typically spends on a single order.	This can help you decide how to price your products and where you may have an opportunity to create a product bundle or kit, or choose where to cross- and up-sell.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT MEASURES	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
CONVERSION RATE	A percentage of how many visitors convert.	A healthy conversion rate means you have a highly engaged customer base and is a sign of growth and success. If it's low, look to user journey mapping to see where you're losing site visitors.
SHOPPING CART ABANDONMENT RATE	The percentage of visitors who abandon their cart during the checkout process	If you have a high cart abandonment rate, this may be a sign you need to optimize your checkout process. Learn more by looking at where in the process they are leaving.
TRAFFIC (NEW VS. RETURNING)	The number of people that visit your website. How many of these visitors are new vs. returning users?	If you have a lot of new traffic, this is a sign your marketing strategy is reaching new people. If you have many returning users, this is a sign your customer loyalty and engagement is high.
SITE SPEED	The speed of your website and specific landing pages.	Fast load times are crucial to the success of your online business. This KPI will help diagnose any speed issues on your website.
BOUNCE RATE	The percentage of users who leave your website after viewing only one page.	If you have a high bounce rate, this could be a sign that your content is not resonating with your target audience.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT MEASURES	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
TRAFFIC SOURCE	Where your visitors come from and how they get to your site.	This KPI can help pinpoint which marketing strategies are working. If it's traffic from Google search, it could be from your SEO. If it's from LinkedIn, it could be your social media marketing efforts. If it's direct, you may have great content marketing and a very loyal customer base.
MOBILE SITE TRAFFIC	How many visitors come to your site via a mobile device.	Understanding mobile site traffic is an indicator of how customers experience your online business. If you're experiencing high traffic via mobile devices, make sure your site is fully optimized for mobile use and consider developing a mobile app.
DAY PART MONITORING	What time of day you have the most visitors.	Understanding what time of day customers visit your website can give your team ideas on when to push promotions or drop new launches.
PRODUCT AFFINITY	Which products are purchased together.	This can help you brainstorm cross-promotion strategies.

02 Marketing success factors.

When you're rolling out digital marketing campaigns, you'll want to understand how they are performing.

Common types of campaigns include:

- ◢ **Email marketing**
- ◢ Paid social
- ◢ Affiliate marketing (like **working with influencers**)
- ◢ Paid search

Here are a few marketing KPIs and why they're valuable:

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT IS	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
PAY-PER-CLICK (PPC)	How much traffic you're successfully driving to your site from a paid search campaign.	This can help you determine if the keywords you're targeting your spend on are accurate for your business.
CLICK-THROUGH-RATE (CTR)	The percentage of users on a page (or asset) who click on a link.	This is a key indicator to determine if your content is driving engagement.
SUBSCRIBER GROWTH RATE	The rate by which your subscriber list is growing.	This will provide insight on whether your content is resonating with your target audience or not. It will also be a sign to spend more efforts on content marketing.
EMAIL OPEN RATE	The percentage of email recipients that open an email that is part of an email marketing campaign.	If your rate is low, try using new, creative subject lines, or try cleaning out your subscriber list by removing inactive users.

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT IS	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
SOCIAL FOLLOWERS	How many followers your brand has across your social media profiles.	Social media following is an indicator of how large your customer community is — and whether or not they enjoy and engage with your brand and content.
NUMBER AND QUALITY OF PRODUCT REVIEWS	An audit of the quantity and quality of product reviews.	Product reviews help with your website's SEO and offer valuable feedback for your business. This is a key indicator of your customers' overall satisfaction.
BANNER OR DISPLAY ADVERTISING CTRS	The percentage of viewers who have clicked on a banner or display ad.	This will help you evaluate the quality of your copy, placement, imagery, and offer.
BLOG TRAFFIC	How many users visit your blog, whether they are new or returning visitors, and how many pages they visit.	This can help you evaluate the quality of your content and determine if your blog is a true driver of overall site engagement.
AFFILIATE PERFORMANCE	From which affiliates or channels do you get the most gain from your affiliate spend?	Monitoring this will help you understand which channels are most successful for affiliate work.
AVERAGE POSITION (SEARCH)	How and where you rank on search engine results pages.	This will tell you if your site's search engine optimization (SEO) is healthy. Most brands aim to rank #1 for related keywords.

03 For the small business owner.

Last but not least, you'll want to have a high-level picture of how your business is performing.

This can be incredibly helpful when pitching to investors or building your scalable business plan.

In addition to all of the metrics we've talked about thus far, you'll want to pay attention to the following key performance indicators (KPIs):

KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI)	WHAT IT IS	WHY IT'S VALUABLE
CUSTOMER LIFETIME VALUE (LTV)	How much a customer is worth to your business over the course of their relationship with your brand.	A great measurement of overall customer loyalty. You should work to actively increase this number.
CUSTOMER ACQUISITION COST (CAC)	How much your company spends to acquire a new customer, measured by looking at your marketing spend and how it breaks down per individual customer.	This can help determine your brand's total ROI for marketing and advertising. Having an active awareness of your CAC can help prioritize campaigns within your budget.
GROSS PROFIT	The total cost of goods subtracted from total sales.	This will tell you whether or not your business is profitable.
AVERAGE MARGIN	The percentage that represents your profit margin over a period of time.	This indicates the overall growth and state of health for your business.
COST OF GOODS SOLD (COGS)	How much you're spending to sell a product.	Factor in manufacturing, employee wages, and overhead costs, and determine if your spend is validated.
COMPETITIVE PRICING	What your competitors are charging for a similar product.	This is part of a competitive analysis strategy and will help you gauge your success.

Analytics Tools

Now that you have an idea of what to measure, where and how do you do it?

Most ecommerce websites utilize a tool like **Google Analytics** to keep daily tabs on their chosen key performance indicators (KPIs).

In tools as such, you can set up daily dashboards, customized reporting, and even see your site activity in real time.

In addition, ecommerce platforms like BigCommerce come built with an easily accessible and highly informative dashboard that offers an overview of your site and sales performance.

Other popular Google suite tools to use for your online business analytics are:

- **Google Tag Manager**
- **Google AdWords**

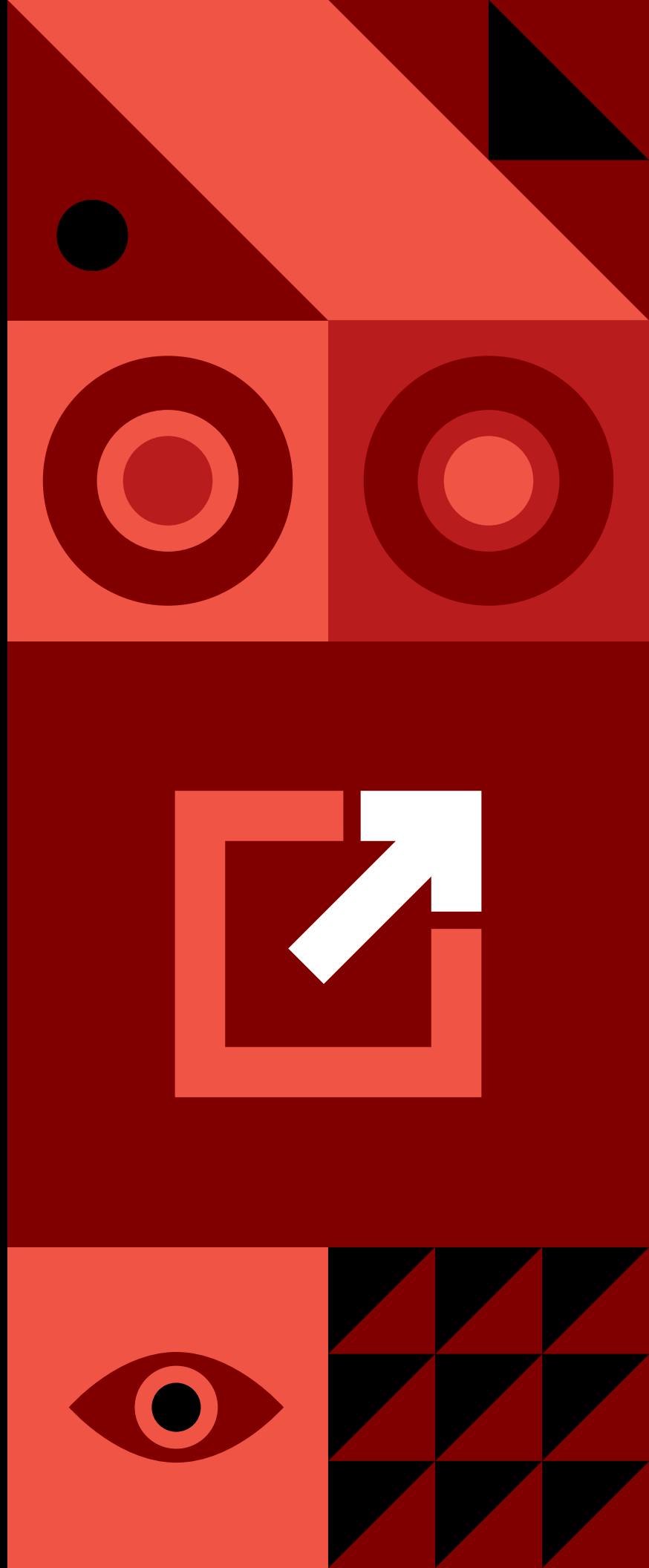Next up: how to plan for scaling your business. With these analytics, you're already one step ahead.

5 Things To Consider When Scaling Your Online Business

Chapter 13: 5 Things To Consider When Scaling Your Online Business

As your business takes flight, you'll begin growing quarter over quarter, year over year.

That is — until the day comes when you've either grown so fast you can't keep up with customer demands and expectations or you've reached a growth plateau.

Planning for future growth is crucial to your ecommerce livelihood. Today's business owners have to be prepared to face exponential growth head on if they want to be a leader in their niche.

Spoiler alert: preparing your online store for exponential growth takes a lot of time.

But — another spoiler alert: it's not as difficult as you may think.

Making smart decisions from the start of your business — like choosing a scalable ecommerce platform — can make a big difference in the longevity of your online business.

Who's ready to grow? Let's take your business to the next level.

Why Should I Scale My Online Business?

We all dream of owning a million dollar business, but we also know it doesn't happen overnight.

Scaling your ecommerce business strategically is the best way to manage high growth and help prevent your business from dealing with a slew of unhappy customers.

In this guide, we've talked a lot about:

- **Online marketing strategies** — like social media, podcasts, blogging, and SEO — to drive growth and acquire new customers.

- **Omnichannel strategies** — like selling on Amazon, Etsy, or another online marketplace.

- **Email marketing** — to assist your sales funnel and enable potential customers to opt-in to your newsletter to grow your email list.

Chances are your business model includes at least one of these growth tactics, and you've started to see its effectiveness. In turn, you're feeling both excitement and growing pains.

Small business owner life, am I right?

Taking a strategic approach to business growth enables you to always be ready for what's next.

Maybe that's introducing new products, managing additional social media accounts, growing your content marketing with the use of freelancers, bloggers, and influencers.

Either way, small business owners can follow our step-by-step guide to get ahead of the curve.

5 Key Tactics To Scale Your Small Business

Every business is different, but they can all benefit from these five tactics to scaling an online business.

01 **Plan ahead.**

As you've built your business, you've probably heard the word "plan" too many times to count.

There's a reason for that — it's vital to your business, no matter what stage you're at.

To plan ahead, set realistic goals for growth. These can be quarterly or yearly goals.

This gives you time to prepare for upcoming growth. As you near these goals, research what resources or features you will need in your next stage.

Here are a few components to factor into your plan:

- Your ecommerce platform
- Shipping and fulfillment
- Human resources (e.g., in-house vs. agency/freelancers)
- Your planned expansion to offline storefronts

All of these components also affect your bottom line: **budget**.

Let's talk about how to make sure you're bringing in capital for future use.
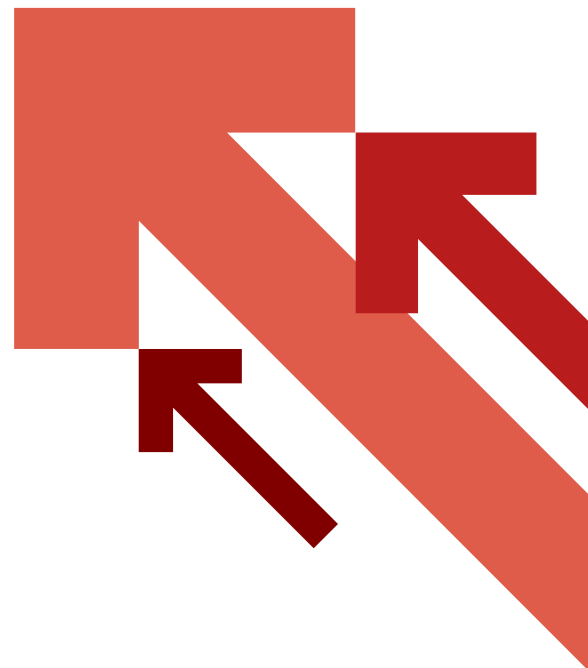
02 Get Money In Your Wallet (+ Spend It Wisely)

While we'd all like to be featured on Shark Tank, you can't bank on it when it comes to the approach you take to funding your business.

Small business owners are tasked with one large responsibility: securing funding and collateral to run their business.

My gut tells me you've already tried one tactic to fund your small business — bootstrapping.

Bootstrapping is the coined business term for relying on either your own personal funds (think your personal savings), a crowdfunding source (e.g., **Kickstarter**), or money pitched in or loaned from friends and family.

The next logical step for many is pitching to investors.

While investors can provide great value to your business — like expertise and funds to execute your business plan — they also take part ownership of the brand.

This option works for many small business owners, but if you're wary to partner with an investor, there are still many other ways to secure funds.

Scholarships and grants. No, they are not only for college students.

Many larger companies or business organizations offer scholarships for small businesses and startups. We're talking big money — anywhere from $5k+ to help you reach the next level.

Here are a few great scholarships:

- **Create & Cultivate Chandon Scholarship**
- **Fundbox Small Business Funding Scholarship**
- **FedEx Small Business Grant Contest**
- **U.S. Small Business Administration Grants**

Then, there are companies that specialize in helping fund small businesses.

Capital Factory — an Austin co-working space for the entrepreneurs of Texas — has a free program to help grow startups called the **Accelerator program**. With no cost to you*, your business can take advantage of:

- Education and mentorship

- Investors and resources

- Special events

- Co-working

- And more than $250,000 in potential total hosting credits from Amazon, Google, Microsoft, IBM, and others that last most companies 1-2 years.

*By participating in this program, Capital Factory receives stock worth 1% of the company and the rights to invest in your next big round of funding.

For additional options on how to manage your funding and spend, take a look at these companies:

- **Fundbox**. For B2B businesses, Fundbox offers a credit and payments network that unlocks growth for driven businesses by accelerating payments and credit.

- **Brex**. A BigCommerce Partner, Brex offers interest-free financing for your ecommerce business.

03 Monitor your analytics.

Monitoring your business's performance gives you direct insight into the speed of your growth.

Sales performance is the first metric you'll want to begin analyzing when looking to scale.

Look at the trends, is it healthy? How fast are your sales growing? What do you attribute that growth to?

Having a strong sales performance is a key indicator of your scalability because it reflects the health of your business. If the metrics are positive and growing, you can confirm growth is in your future.

Other important growth metrics are:

- Ecommerce conversion — Are most of your shoppers online or offline? Where are they spending their dollars?

- Product performance — Which products are your top sellers? Is there an opportunity to expand your product line?

- ◢ LTV:CAC (Lifetime Value:Cost per Acquisition) — Understand your marketing power. Is your cost of acquiring customers worth it?

Having direct insight into your analytics will provide a stronger pitch to investors and more confidence when spending money on updated technology.

04 Create a buzz.

As your business builds traffic, it's important you stay engaged and create more buzz for your brand.

Building off of existing interest and traffic is a great way to optimize growth. For many, the first step to creating buzz is on social media. While this is a great avenue for building buzz, you don't want to put all of your eggs in one basket — especially considering how often the Instagram algorithm changes.

Depending on the nature of your business, you can look into:

- ◢ Hosting a webinar (e.g., how to decorate for the holidays with your product, sharing your expertise on a specific topic, etc.)

- ◢ Sharing your story on a landing page on your website

- ◢ Executing an email marketing strategy and building your subscriber list

- ◢ Pitching your brand to public relations firms

- ◢ Reaching out to influencers to partner with them and leverage their audience
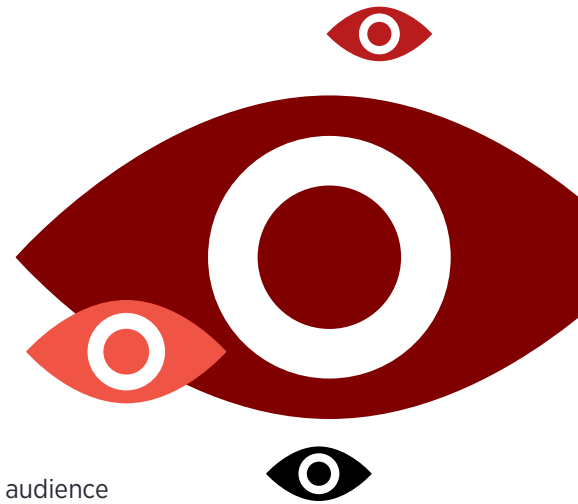
05 Determine your resources.

As you grow, you'll need to add resources to your toolkit, as you won't be able to manage a large business entirely on your own.

Resources for your business refer to both human resources and technical resources.

Let's take a look at a couple of examples of when you might want to invest in human resources.

If you are looking to ramp up your content marketing with a blog on your website, you may want to consider hiring a content and/or SEO manager or freelancers who can scale your content and make sure you rank on leading search engines like Google.

Or perhaps you want to quickly build your community on social media. Consider hiring a social media manager who can curate posts, create captions, and drive engagement for your target

audience across platforms like Instagram or LinkedIn.

For technical resources, let's consider two examples.

While you could call on many different shipping companies to negotiate pricing, you could save time by utilizing a shipping software — that comes with pre-negotiated pricing.

Or, with more customers, your customer support line has been receiving an overwhelming amount of calls. Implementing a chatbot on your website, like Driftbot, can help you attend to customer needs on the go, 24/7.

Taking the time to see where you need help or where you can be more productive will help you prioritize what resources to invest in.

Once you do invest in these resources, be sure to evaluate their performance to ensure you are getting value for your spend.

06 Invest in technology.

As you grow, you'll need technology that can support your business.

Some brands start out on an ecommerce platform that supplies the basics. Then, they reach a ceiling. This can often leave small business owners overwhelmed with what to do with their online platform.

Do they try to manage with limited support? Or do they switch to a platform that can better scale the business.

The latter of the two is the right choice. But, what if there was an ecommerce platform that could eliminate this issue from the beginning?

> **BigCommerce** is a scalable ecommerce solution. We will support your store from when you're managing from your bedroom to when you have a team of 100 and beyond. With easy-to-upgrade plans and advanced out-of-the-box features, BigCommerce can power your store while supporting your growth.
>
> **START YOUR FREE TRIAL**

As you've learned in this guide, there's much more technology than just your ecommerce solution. Here are a few other solutions you may want to look into upgrading as you scale:

- ◢ Content Management System (CMS) (e.g. WordPress)

- ◢ Automated Email Marketing Software

- ◢ Shipping and Fulfillment Software

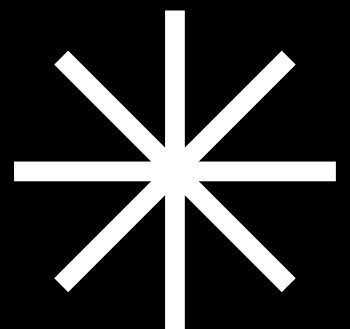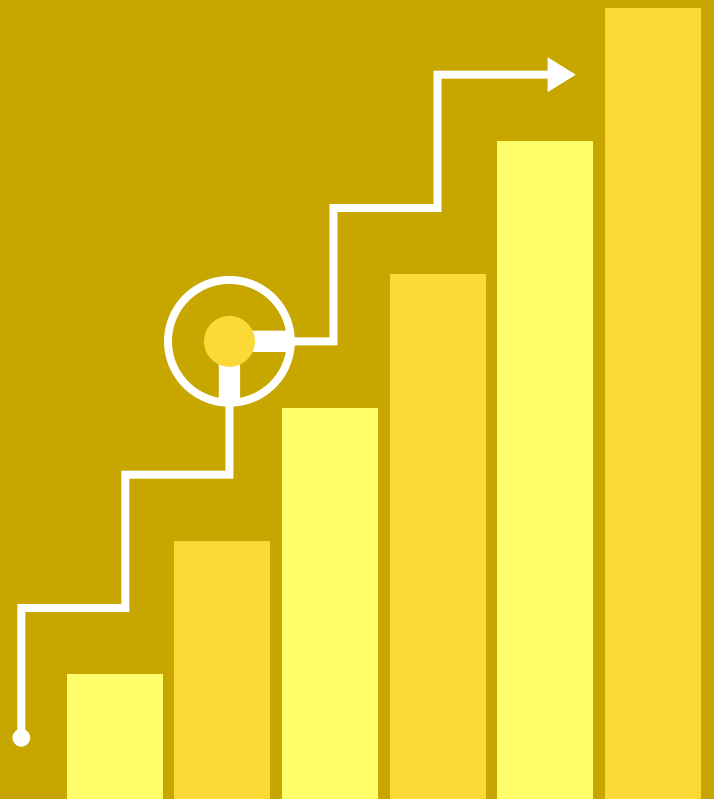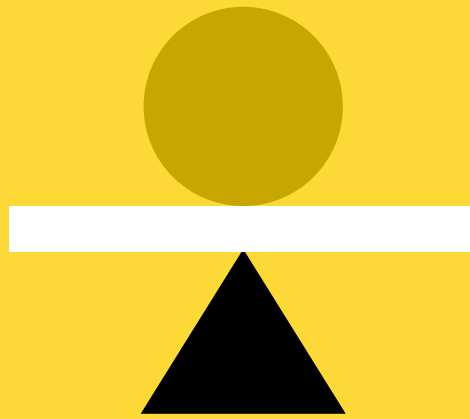- ◢ Payment solutions (e.g. credit cards, Apple Pay)

- ◢ Google Suite

Now, you've read through 14 chapters of how to sell online. Head on to our last chapter to hear from industry experts on how to implement the strategies you've learned.

Insights on How To Achieve Small Business Success
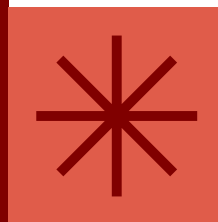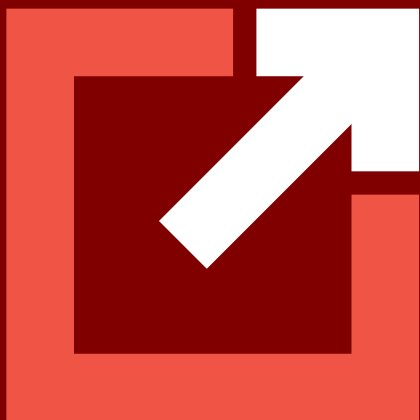
Chapter 14: Insights on How To Achieve Small Business Success

Chapter by chapter we've unlocked the keys to online small business success.

You've created a great product.

Built a stunning website, optimized with advanced ecommerce functionality.

Started uniting a strong customer base, thanks to innovative marketing strategies.

Negotiated exclusive shipping discounts, resulting in an enhanced customer experience.

The list goes on.

Now — it's time to hear from the experts. What should you keep in mind while you strive for ecommerce success?

17 Tips for Online Small Business Owners

01 Learn from your customers.

As you grow your business, listening to feedback from your customer base is crucial.

Alex Kubo, VP of E-Commerce and Digital Marketing at Burrow, encourages small business owners to listen and engage with their customers. Why? It was relying on customer insight and feedback that built the Burrow brand as consumers know it today.Jason's number one tip for small business owners is centered around the value in listening and engaging with your customers.

"Early on, from a branding and positioning standpoint, we focused on a couple of key value props that we thought were going to resonate with people. After a few months of collecting data and talking to customers, we realized that the value props that we presented — a more premium shopping experience and premium product — really resonated with a whole different consumer set. So, we elevated the positioning, we elevated the branding, and that's where you see Burrow today."

Also, be sure you are encouraging your customers to communicate with you. Like Jason mentioned, product reviews are a great way to garner feedback. Other ways to connect and receive feedback include social media and documenting customer support communication.

02 Prioritize customer support.

Sammy Gibson, Director at **Neon Poodle**, knows how important it is to put customers first -- especially as a small business.

"Our focus is customer service, and fast email and social media response is critical for building brand trust. We try to keep response time to 24 hours or less for all emails from customers and wholesalers…"

Prioritizing customer support gives your business the chance to turn unhappy customers into loyal ones. If you can be there in a pinch, you can relieve the issue and deliver your brand promise.

In addition, high quality support can often lead to more brand awareness and brand loyalty and trust. Sammy has found that "with brand trust comes social media tagging between groups and good word of mouth."

03   Stay focused on your niche.

When you begin a new business venture, it's easy to get excited and want to tap into different markets. But, spreading yourself too thin can result in missed opportunities to capture an engaged audience.

Dan Kogan, CEO at **1Digital Agency** shares what he believes small business owners should focus on as they grow their brand.

"Stay focused on your niche and constantly:

- ◢ *Optimize your products and services,*

- ◢ *Focus on organic SEO growth as it drives trust,*

- ◢ *Stay committed to your niche, so that you can stand out of the pact, and*

- ◢ *Reinvest into digital marketing. Sales trumps all."*
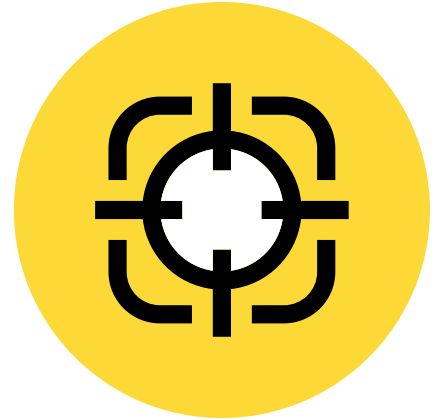
04   Deliver an experience your customers won't forget.

Think of some of your favorite brands, what is it about them that keeps you loyal?

The customer experience.

Customer experience has a domino effect. If you do it well, you will see a boost in positive brand awareness, traffic, and loyal customers to your online store.

Kaleigh Moore, freelancer at **kaleighmoore.com**, believes small business owners should put priority on just that.

"Create memorable experiences for customers and go the extra mile. That effort still pays dividends."

05   Be time-efficient.

As a small business owner, you wear many hats.

At some point in your journey you are the CEO.

The Digital Marketing and Ecommerce Manager.

The Logistics Manager.

The list goes on.

As you grow your business, you must use your time efficiently. To help you do this, look to technology and automation.

Ailsa Chibnall, Owner & Web Strategist at **Border7**, shares, *"if you don't value your time, no one else will. Use technology and the power of automation to help you reclaim your day and reinforce your process!"*

There are many different tools that can aid you in this department. Look to your business and where your gaps are to identify where you should spend your dollars.

Per Ailsa:

- *"Use **Hotjar** to better understand site visitors and how they're interacting with your site,*

- ***Keap** for automation and personalizing your marketing, and*

- ***Calendly** for setting appointments and avoiding the back and forth of scheduling."*
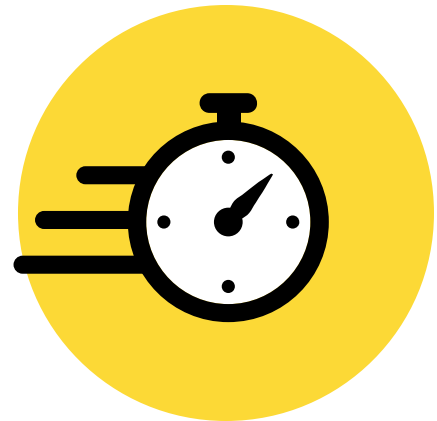
06 Think omnichannel.

Omnichannel strategies are on the rise, and it's no surprise.

In 2020, customers are shopping in more places. On your ecommerce store, on Amazon, on Instagram...the list goes on.

To make sure you are building brand awareness and offering more flexible options for your customers to purchase your products, start developing an omnichannel strategy.

Nick Gramatikov, CTO at **Digitawise**, believes small business owners can see many benefits from executing this strategy.

"Give customers access to your brand in ways that are convenient for them. Nowadays customers are omnichannel, meaning that they engage with businesses through various

channels including different social platforms, text, email, live chat, and others. By providing omnichannel quality support, you show them that you value their business."

Remember, as you begin, you may not be able to sell everywhere and anywhere. Scale your omnichannel strategy as you learn more about your target audience and where they shop.

Nick recommends small businesses to *"have an omnichannel support strategy in place including a live chat tool. Monitor closely all your major social media channels and respond to clients and potential in a timely manner."*

This way, you'll be able to capture more information about your customers and leverage your relationship with them to enhance your omnichannel strategy.

07   Find a balance.

Buckle up for long nights and early mornings, celebratory wins and trips back to the drawing board. Owning and running a small business takes hard work.

That's why finding a balance within your day-to-day work is essential.

William Harris, Ecommerce Growth Consultant at **Elumynt**, knows a thing or two about managing day-to-day function.

"Hustle hard — but find balance. You will work harder than you've ever worked before and there will be periods of 100-hour work weeks, but those aren't sustainable, and they will actually decrease your performance if you do that for too long.

You will wear a lot of hats, but continue to find ways to take small risks on hiring the right people to take over certain tasks and functions so you can focus on actually building the brand.

1. ***Get better at Google Analytics*** — it's so powerful and underutilized by almost everyone.

2. ***Offload tasks*** — the best companies figure out that they aren't experts at everything. And even if you are amazing at something, like advertising, there still comes a point where you need to focus on the

business and let someone else focus on the ads.

3. ***Content, content, content*** — think through this and truly map out what you want people to see first, second, and third. What truly differentiates you? Then, create content about that specific to the platform you're on so it fits."

08 Don't fear larger, more established competitors.

You're fresh meat in a competitive market. That can feel pretty intimidating.

Remember, you're introducing new products into the market because there is a need for them. You have something that your competition lacks.

David Zimmerman, Director of eCommerce Solutions at **Kensium**, encourages small business owners to *"not be afraid to compete against companies that are bigger or older than you. Many of these older companies are still hesitant or unwilling to shift their businesses online, leaving the door open for small businesses to win their customers and capture market share."*

A great way to get ahead of your competition is through technology - specifically your ecommerce solution.

"With the advancement in technology over the past decade, certain commerce solutions and back-office systems are becoming more modern, user-friendly, and easier to integrate, enabling smaller businesses to scale faster and compete with the big boys at a fraction of the cost."

09 Take an organized approach.

Keeping every part of your business organized will keep functions running smooth.

Scott Ginsberg, Head of Content at **Metric Digital**, shares that his *"personal mantra for knowledge management has always centered around one principle: If you don't write it down, it never happened."*

Writing ideas down will help you brainstorm different options for your business, and keep your priorities in check.

Scott shares, *"if your organization wants to replicate your team knowledge more exactly and practically, create a process to get things out of people's heads and into objective, reviewable formats. All that glitters is not gold. There's a clever saying from the construction world that should be plastered on the walls of every small business. 'We got a dollar waiting on a dime.' Meaning — let's not allow the shiny, trivial things overwhelm the vital."*
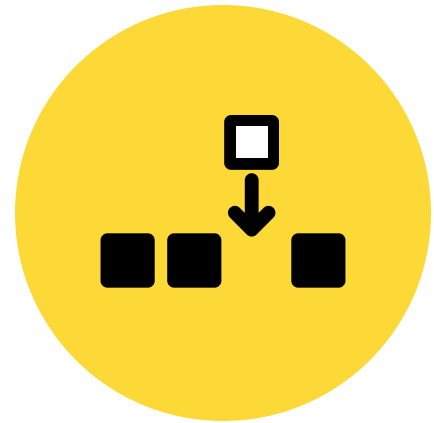
Now, every idea you write down won't come to life. You'll need to figure out which ideas will give you the biggest bang for your buck. As small business owners quickly discover, you must learn how to create a reputable business with little budget.

"Learn how to do a lot with a little. Startups put a constant wall in front of you that only creativity will allow you to figure out how to get around it. Don't underestimate your resourcefulness. Trust that in any given startup situation, you and your team will figure out how to tame the beast."

Lastly, it's important to stay organized, so you can focus on your team's morale. With great morale, you'll get more done and have more excitement and creativity to add to your brand.

"Acknowledgement is the only cultural currency that matters. Want to boost morale? Create in employees the genuine feeling of being seen for their whole person beyond just their role. Even if it's a simply shout out during the weekly meeting or leaving a review on their online profile. Think of it as the herd mentality. That's what makes employees loyal."

10 Choose your battles wisely.

Just like your personal life, it's important to choose your battles wisely.

Starting a business and experiencing growing pains can be stressful. Focus on your most valuable assets and plans to stay steady on the path to success.

Joe Chilson, Head Writer and Account Manager at **1Digital Agency**, shares, *"if there is one piece of advice that is relevant to any and all small business owners, I'd say that it's picking your battles.*

While you're still small you don't have the time, resources, or influence to do everything at once. You need to be careful what you decide to go after, and set achievable goals, especially when it comes to your marketing budget. Each small win will make the next one easier."

For those businesses that are already established, Joe recommends taking a closer look at the following:

- ◢ *"**Email marketing**. It sees the most direct results of any digital marketing activity. You already have customers that like you. They just need to be reminded to come back every once in a while.*

- ◢ ***SEO**. It's a lot easier when your name has some weight behind it. Once your business has some authority, you can go after bigger keywords and rank for them more quickly.*

- ◢ ***Consistent updates to the site**. Keeping things fresh, in both design and content, will not only make you more attractive to Google, it will help you constantly refine the sales funnel on the site."*

11 Build a team.

While you may be very passionate about your business, you won't achieve success by going about it all on your own.

When Kim Terry, CEO at **Subscription Systems LLC**, began her business, she learned that she needed to rely on both human and technical resources to achieve her dream.

When asked what advice she would give to small business owners, Kim shared, *"don't try to do everything yourself! One major key to growing is to learn what to hold on to and know what to trust to others. Too many small business owners I have seen never develop their company, as 'there are not enough hours in the day' for them to do everything. Either they burn out or progress slows to accommodate the amount of time they have available.*

Use SaaS, Cloud, and Outsourced services as much as possible. These services are already working for you and do not require staff in your company to run them. Hire people who can do effective vendor management instead of do'ers. You will need a lot fewer of them."

12 Learn to be flexible.

Joe Palko, Marketing Wizard at **Your Store Wizards**, shares his number one piece of advice:

"Learn to be flexible."

Why is this so important for small business owners? Being flexible allows you to be a better listener to your customer base, be adaptable to change, and always be ready to embrace what's next. This will keep you ahead of the game.

Joe wants small business merchants to pay close attention to technology and user feedback.

"Technology is changing fast, and the small business owners I see fall behind are those who become attached to how something works. Just because something works for you now doesn't mean that it's going to work the same way in a few years. Pay attention to trends. I hear from merchants all the time, 'We need it to be this way because this is the way it's always been and it works.'"

Listen to the experts, listen to your customers...

- ▲ ***Product reviews*** *— Make sure you are using product reviews and that you are doing them in a way that they are being indexed.*

- ▲ ***Mobile*** *— Make sure that your themes are responsive and mobile-ready, and that your website is easily usable on mobile.*

- ▲ ***Email marketing*** *— Do the best job you can to segment your customers (you can do an entire article on segmentation and how to do it)."*

13   Be true to your business.

Don't follow the crowd.

When you sought out to start your own business, you did so because there was something missing in the market. By staying true to your passion and purpose, you will be able to communicate your genuine and organic message to your customers.

Tessa Wuertz, Director of Marketing & Partnerships at **efelle Creative**, believes success comes from authentically made brands.

"Stay true to who you are. If you've seen success, there's a reason for it, and oftentimes it's the brand behind a business, so take that into account when you're making decisions moving forward."

She also shares three factors that small business owners should keep in mind when creating go to market strategies.

1. *"**Your website is a tool**. With a website, you have a place where people can look up your business, shop, and learn more about your business. If you've got products and aren't online, you've got to have a website that tells your story.*

2. ***Ask your customers for feedback**. Whether it's about your product, customer service, or website, make it part of your strategy to ask for their feedback about how you're doing.*

3. ***Marketing and email automation**. Creating email sequences to welcome new customers to your business, send out abandoned cart emails, and provide weekly updates can really build your relationship with current and potential customers. And with marketing automation, a lot of the work is front-loaded, so it's continually working for you and your business."*

14   Data analytics are your friend.
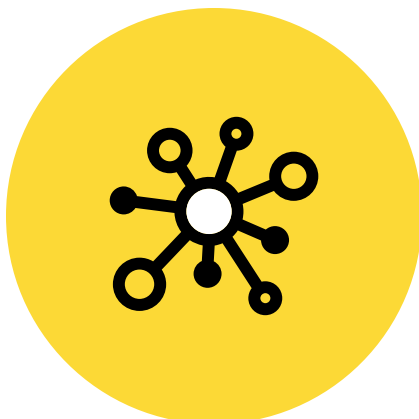
In Chapter 12, we talked about monitoring key KPIs for your business - and all the benefits that come from doing so.

Shane Barker, Founder + CEO of **shanebarker.com**, reinforces this in his own advice for small business owners.

"Use data analytics to your advantage.

Data is the key to understanding your customers.

And by analyzing it, you'll be able to improve your offerings. This, in turn, will help you grow your business.

Three of my favorite tools are Trello, Slack, and SEMrush. They help with coordination, project management, and website growth."

15 Be the best at what you do.

For a couple of moments, forget about the competition, the state of the market, the small details in your logistics strategy.

Come back to your purpose and brand purpose. Your goal should always be to be the best at what you do.

When you look at the big picture and ask yourself how to be the best at what you do, you will find that your priorities arrive much easier.

Michael Prusich, Director of Business Development at **1Digital Agency**, says to *"don't worry about being the best at everything; just be the best at something. From my experience working in small businesses and overseeing business development for small businesses and our clients here at 1Digital, I believe one of the biggest roadblocks that small business owners run into is that they want to solve every problem at once and want to try to do too much at the same time.*

Although this is typical of an entrepreneur and a small business owner, I have found that being great at one thing lends itself better to the initial growth and development of a smaller company as opposed to trying to spread yourself too thin."

Once you've got your priorities in line, you can face obstacles with confidence.

Michael explains, *"Product quality aside, merchants are trying to have the best customer service, the largest inventory, fastest shipping, and so on. This can be an overwhelming amount of obstacles when resources are limited to small businesses.*

1. ***Don't underestimate the significance of SEO and Google Ads****. A large budget isn't necessarily needed to see amazing results. But the proper strategy, implementation, and execution can be paramount to an online business' overall health*

2. ***Don't be afraid to evolve and change***. *Just because something is working now doesn't mean the industry trends aren't shifting. One of the biggest problems I see occurring to small businesses is that they get left behind and realize it after it is too late.*

3. ***People are everything***. *It's the employees of your company that matter the most, and ensuring you have a team that challenges you, thinks outside of the box, isn't afraid to speak up, and most of all feels appreciated is a factor that can't be measured."*

16 Think holistically.

"Think holistically! Your business isn't just your website — it's a multitude of channels that can be leveraged to increase sales and brand visibility," shares Richard Parr, Creative Director at **Kensium**.

Look at your business as a whole — how do you tie together your brand message and experience? How does it connect?

Richard shares three key tactics for small business owners to keep in mind:

1. *"***Establish a consistent brand across all channels*** — Without this you weaken your business.*

2. ***Drink the Google Kool-Aid*** *— Use the tools they provide to boost visibility and track conversions.*

3. ***Consistently market*** *— Establish a monthly budget and schedule, pay attention to marketing to all your potential customers."*
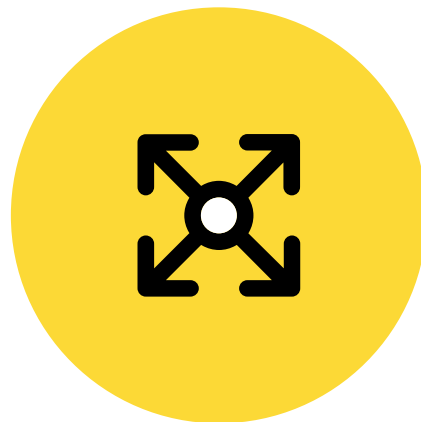
17 Be passionate in everything you do.

Last but not least, I wanted to contribute my own advice for small business owners.

From contributing to a digital transformation on a Forbes 500 ecommerce team to side-hustling with my blog and influencer work to managing small business content at **BigCommerce** — I've learned a lot about what it takes to build a successful small business.

My advice? Be passionate in everything you do.

The reality is owning a small business is no easy task. Being passionate about what you do, the products you sell, and the

customers you do business with will help give your business purpose and a drive for growth.

This emotional connection and drive will keep you having fun in your day-to-day journey to success — and extend in to how you manage your business.

Focusing on what features your business needs to succeed and how you can deliver the best user experience to your customers will make for strong decision making skills. One of the most helpful decisions you can make for your business is choosing an ecommerce platform, like BigCommerce, that will work with you to bring your business to life — your way.
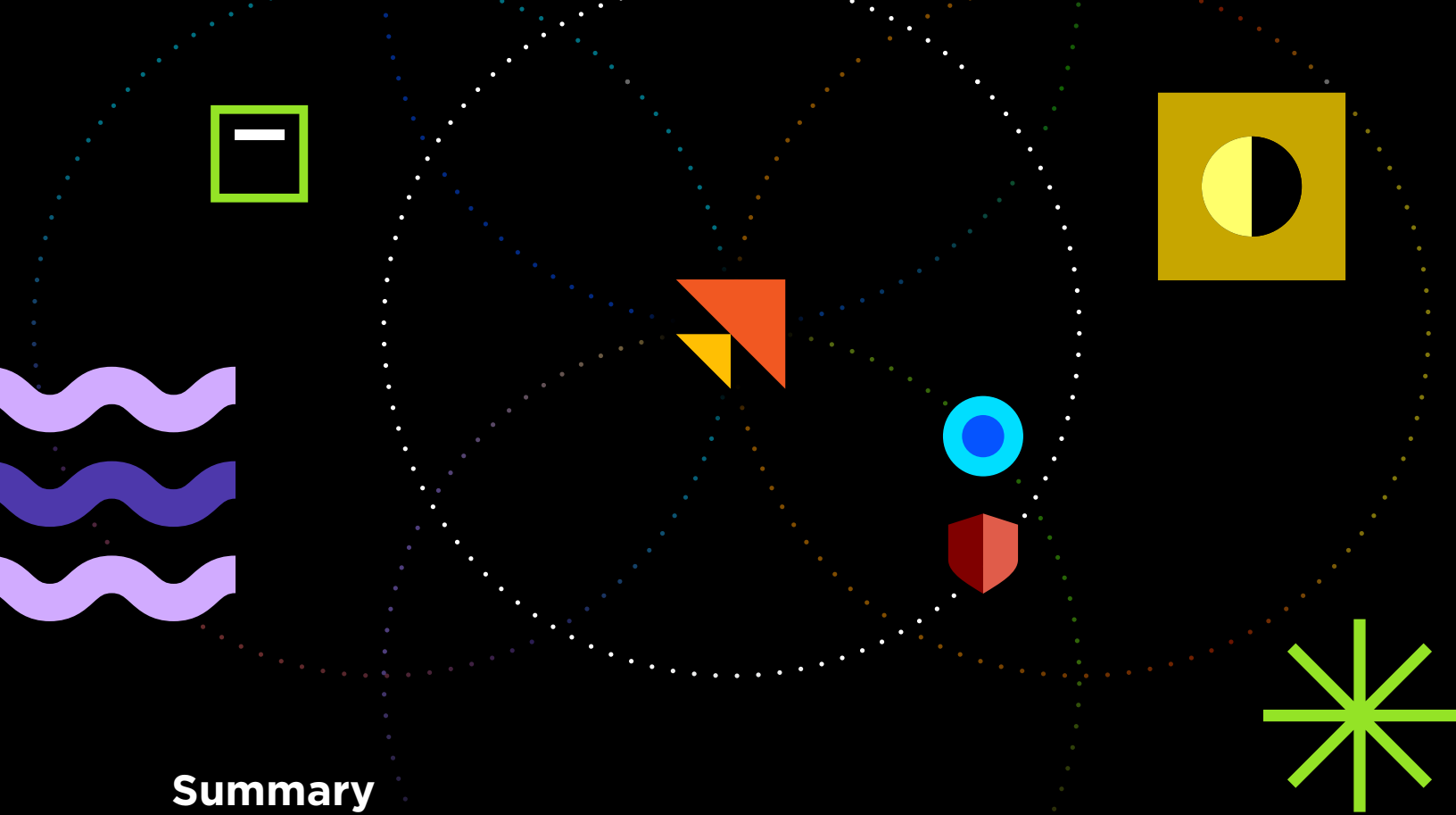
Summary

14 chapters later, we've uncovered the in's and out's to building a successful online business.

No matter what stage you begin your ecommerce journey - whether it be crafting the perfect product sell, growing your omnichannel strategy, or discovering an ecommerce solution that can truly scale your business - it's time to hit the drawing board.

At BigCommerce, we know building a business doesn't happen overnight. But, with this guide, you'll be well on your way to building a scalable online business.

When creating your go-to-market strategy, you'll want to keep market viability, competitive edge, business laws, target market, digital marketing strategies, and shipping and fulfillment in clear sight.

That said, at the end of the day, all of those strategies and tactics will fail without the support of a scalable ecommerce platform.

For more information on how BigCommerce can power your business, and take you beyond the basics, begin a 14-day free trial or connect with a sales representative today.

Now, will you be the next brand to make it big?

FAQs About Selling Online

How do you sell products online?

If you are interested in selling products online, we suggest the following steps to increase your chances of success.

It is rare that you will find any easy product to sell.

It takes work both pre and post-launch to successfully sell products online.

1. Do market research.

2. Finalize products to sell.

3. Choose which ecommerce platforms to sell on such as your own online store, Amazon, eBay, Facebook and other sites customers buy from.

4. Create high-quality product content (including product descriptions and imagery).

5. Market to your potential customers to drive traffic to product listings.
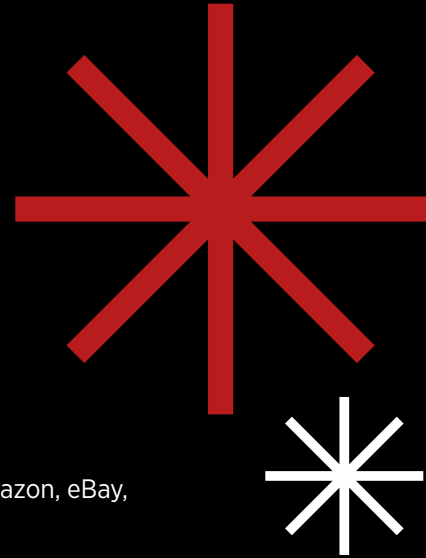
Where can I sell my products?

For many B2C ecommerce merchants, branded stores, along with Amazon and eBay account for over 90% of all sales.

Below are several places to sell your products online:

Your own branded store.

◢ Amazon.	◢ Instagram.	◢ Email.
◢ eBay.	◢ Pinterest.	◢ Affiliate sites.
◢ Google Shopping.	◢ Etsy.	◢ Ecommerce landing page
◢ Facebook.	◢ Craigslist.	

Should I have my own site or sell on marketplaces like Etsy, Amazon or eBay?

If you are choosing one option — selling on your own site comes with many more benefits compared to selling on an online marketplace.

Some of these include eliminating direct competition on the same site, the ability to create a user experience design that speaks to the brand, direct customer service support, and better promotional management.

If you want the best of both worlds, try implementing an omnichannel strategy.

How do you start selling on Amazon?

1. Decide what you want to sell.

2. Choose either the Professional plan (sell an unlimited number of products with a listing fee of $39.99 per month or Individuals plan (pay $0.99 per item sold).

3. Register and start listing products.

4. Improve product visibility on Amazon.

5. Drive traffic to your products.

After you list your products, customers will be able to purchase them on Amazon.com. However, you need to be strategic about helping customers find your products.

We suggest improving visibility of your products with tactics such as an Amazon SEO strategy.

We also recommend reading The Definitive Guide to Selling on Amazon for more ideas to help you start selling on Amazon.

Here are some simple answers to frequently asked questions about selling jewelry online.

How do I pick and purchase a good domain?

Choosing a domain name should be one of the first things you research when you are developing your overall store brand.

Your domain name is a key element of your store's branding. Choosing the wrong domain name can hurt your business before you even get it off the ground.

Here are a few tips to help you choose a domain name.

- Keep your name short.

- Stick with common spellings. (i.e. Couture starts with a "C" not a "K.")

- Stick with .com domains. They are generally better than .net, .info, .biz, .co, etc.

- Don't use dashes, abbreviations or numbers in your domain name.

- Don't buy a domain without researching its past history: Was it involved in any legal or trademark disputes? Were the previous owners engaging in blackhat SEO tactics? You can use a tool like who.is to find some basic background information before you make the purchase.

Can I use an existing domain with my store?

If you already have a domain name that you bought from your web hosting company, it's very simple to move it to your BigCommerce store.

For a step-by-step guide (with screengrabs), visit this tutorial in our KnowledgeBase. When using this method, it's not necessary to transfer your full domain name to us.

How can I sell my products online for maximum profit?

Keep your operating costs low and your retail prices competitive, so you can offer the best price on the market.

If you create handmade products, you have more exposure to the associated cost of supplies and labor, use this transparency to your advantage.

Be cautious of steeping prices too high, as this can alienate your customers.

How much should I charge for handmade items?

There is no perfect formula for pricing handmade items. That being said, two main factors to pricing your handmade pieces are cost of supplies and time to create.

As a starting point, double the cost of supplies to reach a wholesale price, and quadruple the cost of supplies to reach a retail price.

Depending on the amount (and cost) of labor, increase prices as needed.

How can social media help me drive more business to my store?

Just like any other business or marketing objective, it's critical to <u>have a strategy in place</u> before you jump in. Your social media presence is only as effective as the community you have around it.

Currently, the most popular social media platform is Instagram — and the platform knows it. Instagram has sought out to create innovative experiences in the app, which is why they **teamed up with BigCommerce** to enable commerce experiences in the app. That's right, customers can shop and convert with their favorite brands directly on Instagram.

Plus, **Instagram influencer marketing** continues to be a strong marketing tactic for many brands.

This is why you need high quality content for your products. Learn more about driving traffic to your store via social media in Chapter 10.

What options do I have to ship my products?

You have several options. Dropshipping, flat-rate shipping, and more. It can be difficult to navigate.

By integrating a shipping solution, you'll gain access to heavily discounted shipping rates with multiple carriers.

When you use a shipping software, you are also able to offer your shoppers a better shipping experience to improve conversion and build brand loyalty.

Can I dropship my products?

Yes, with caution. Dropshipping can be a cost effective and timely shipping and fulfillment method for your business.

However, as you grow, you may not want to use dropshipping as your single shipping fulfillment method, due to the low profit margins associated with it.

Dropshipping should be used as an enhancement. For more about the pros and cons of dropshipping, check out this article.

If I dropship, how can I determine if the quality of my products?

Do your research. Evaluating a quality wholesale supplier is the first step in determining if your products are authentic.
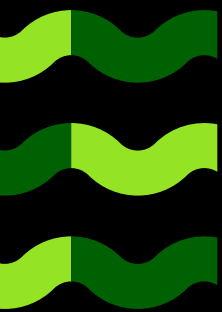
Once you have selected your supplier, have products sent to you to evaluate quality and price.

Repeat this process every quarter to ensure the quality of your products remain the same.

Is BigCommerce the best ecommerce platform?

We may be biased, but we think so — and so do our merchants.

"BigCommerce is an out of the box solution that lets us do anything we want to do from the get go."

— KEN WARD, DIRECTOR OF ECOMMERCE, TYLERSTX.COM

"Thanks to BigCommerce, we scaled our business from our very first order to now a recognized brand, and the platform is able to grow with us as we need to."

— JOHN MERRIS, SOLO STOVE CEO
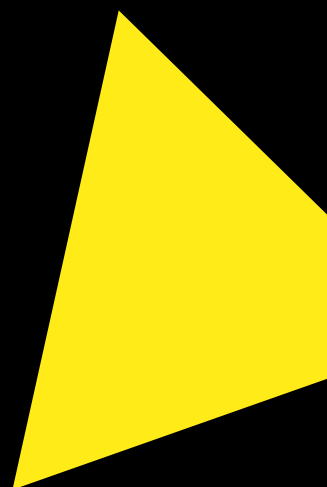
"The value of the BigCommerce headless solution has been huge for Burrow, specifically in enabling us to craft a unique shopping experience."

— KABEER CHOPRA, BURROW CO-FOUNDER AND CPO

"We did well selling on eBay and Etsy, but to grow the business we realized we needed our own site. BigCommerce was the obvious choice."

— CHRIS GERBIG, CO-FOUNDER OF PINK LILY BOUTIQUE

Ready to utilize the native features to scale your brand?

START YOUR FREE TRIAL

BIGCOMMERCE