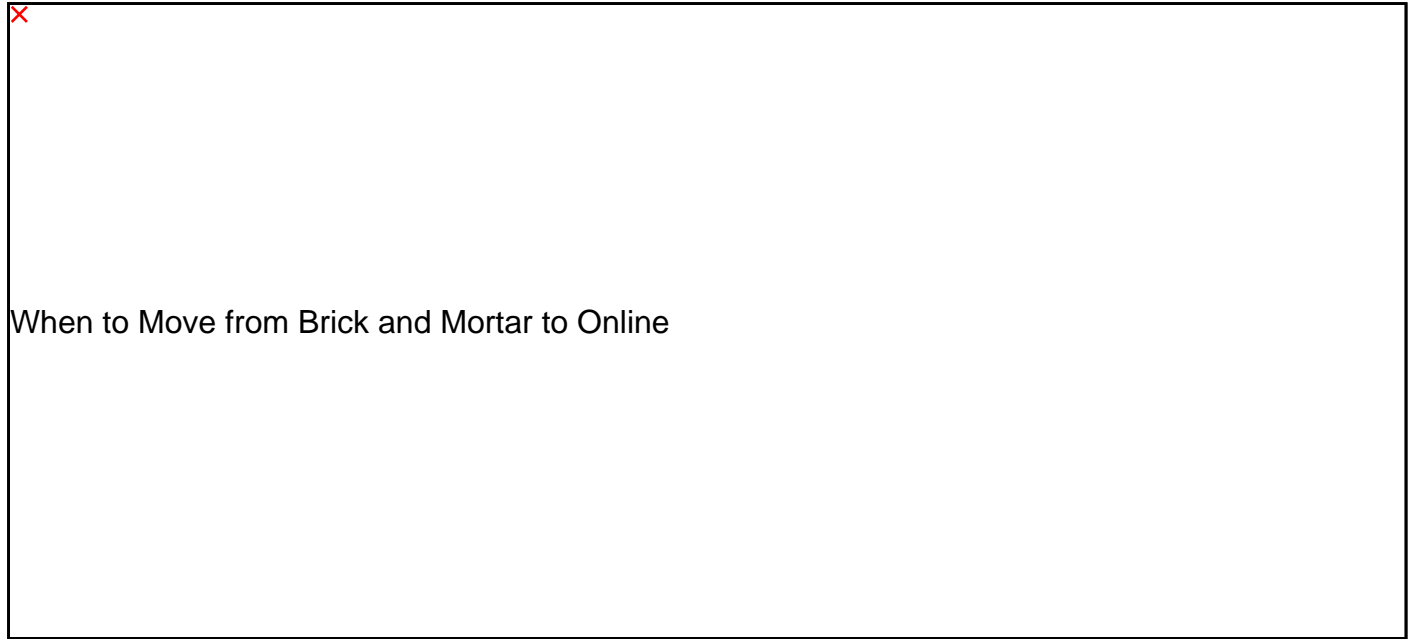


Moving to Online - Is it for you?

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When to Move from Brick and Mortar to Online

If your business sells products, should you have an online presence? Something to consider. For the past several years, The Computing Center has had a small online presence. We sell printer inks and toners through the Amazon platform. Prior to March 2020, that platform provided us with a small additional outlet for these consumables. However, since last March, this area has grown quite dramatically. Daily, we ship toners and inks all over the US. Those additional sales provided our business with a demonstrable extra boost during a year when normal forecasting went out the window. While we have absolutely no intention of changing our business model, online definitely helped us in 2020.

This article from HP Tech@work outlines some of the steps necessary to create an online presence. We'd be happy to discuss our experiences and what we've learned from being "online".

While the transition from in-store sales to ecommerce began long before the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 accelerated online sales growth in a way that no one could have imagined!

A recent survey revealed that a shift in buying habits favored online shopping for everything from magazines to hygiene products. The pandemic specifically motivated up to 31% of shoppers who would have normally purchased in-store to take their business to the internet.

Restaurants, booksellers, and clothing retailers all saw a shift, but how can you know if it's time for you to make the move?

Brick and mortar vs online sales

First, it's helpful to review the differences between in-store and web-based shopping. Some stores stick strictly to in-person sales, with others moving online for ordering while still asking shoppers to stop by in person to pick up their purchases. Brick and mortar, whether it uses web-based tools for sales and logistics or not, exists mainly as a physical store you can visit for an in-person experience.

Online shopping generally exists to capture the online buyer. Yes, some brick-and-mortar companies have done their online verticals so well that we now think of them as an e-tailer (electronic retailer) first, but they still exist as physical locations in some capacity. You also have 100% online stores, which don't have a location you can visit at all.

Within the online market, there are two major structures: online marketplaces and ecommerce sites. Online marketplaces allow companies to sell through larger hosted shopping portals (like Amazon.com or eBay) while ecommerce sites are branded and hosted as individual store websites that market and fulfill their own products.

When would you move to ecommerce?

If you ask any of the businesses who feel the pandemic has forced them to take their sales online to survive, their answer to when they want to make the move online may be “as soon as possible.” But even if it’s not a make-or-break decision, these are common reasons to explore online sales:

- Reach customers not local to your region
- Expand your footprint to new markets
- Cater to younger demographics who are more likely to buy online
- Become competitive with other retailers who succeed online
- Take advantage of data-driven business decisions, ad targeting, and metrics tools
- Give customers another way to initiate a transaction with you, even if they prefer to finish it in-store, via delivery, or curbside

The pandemic may have been the catalyst that sent companies to the internet far sooner than they may have planned, but the trend toward online isn’t slowing. Now that buyers have a taste for the convenience of internet ordering, many may not want to go back to brick-and-mortar stores once the pandemic ends.

Advantages of brick-and-mortar stores

While the transition may force you out of your comfort zone, the fact that you already have a physical store can help you in your move to online commerce. Some advantages to brick-and-mortar stores include an established customer base and product recognition.

The in-person shopping experience allows for customers to:

- Try before they buy
- See the quality of a product
- Verify it’s the right fit, look, or color
- Purchase instantly; faster than shipping

How to move online

The process to **put your business online** involves these basic steps. Perhaps the most important thing to note is the estimated time. Be sure you leave enough bandwidth between stages to fully complete each step since you still need to run your business, even as you plan your online strategy.

1. Choose a platform (several hours)

Before you buy your domain address, you’ll want to know which is best for you: ecommerce or marketplace. Each has its perks. For example, marketplace shops have the brand support of Amazon or Etsy and allow you to get up and running quickly.

Ecommerce sites running with Shopify, for example, may take the longest to create, but offer more personalization, even if using premade templates. Once you choose your platform, you can secure your site and officially claim your shop.

If you need more information about which is your best fit, you can read our **[HP Tech@Work article comparing the two](#)**.

2. Set up payment choices (several days to weeks)

When it comes to taking your customers’ money, you have a host of options to choose from. On the simple end is a **payment service** like PayPal, which is often integrated into your ecommerce or marketplace account. If you choose to accept their default payment options, you won’t need to do much more than verify your business

info and set up a banking account to receive the funds.

If you want something more robust, such as a third-party payment processor with a shopping cart system that you design yourself, you'll need to set aside more time for design, security integration, and possibly even a **POS system**.

Taking a customer's card payment online through a common payment gateway will take considerably less setup time than buying a state-of-the-art POS system that can use purchase data to help drive inventory or marketing decisions.

Bear in mind that when ordering special equipment, it may take weeks to research, buy, and set up to your personal preferences.

3. Decide what you'll sell online (several days to a week)

Give this phase some extra thought because it's easy to make mistakes. You don't want to make everything you sell in your physical store available online, even if you have reason to believe it will sell well. Consider very carefully how you would ship perishables, breakables, and items subject to strict transport or commercial regulations.

There's a big difference between selling and shipping a logo sweatshirt and, say, a \$300 bottle of wine or something that may combust en route to the buyer. You can always decide to sell products online, and then determine which of these will then be fulfilled through shipping options. Some items may sell well virtually but will need to be picked up in person to stay compliant.

4. Photograph and inventory your products (one week or more)

Depending on the number of SKUs you offer, your time to photograph products will vary. You'll spend most of this process designing your studio space, playing with lighting, and determining the best way to capture the look of your merchandise. It's also fine to outsource this task to someone who really knows what they are doing.

Expect to spend several days taking the photos themselves, and even more if you have a large number of product variations (such as different colors and sizes). After this, you still have to set up product listings for each item and describe them in a way that will limit confusion and boost your brand awareness.

5. Connect online and in-store inventories (several days)

If you only sell a couple of types of products, this step won't take too long. If you have hundreds upon hundreds of items in your inventory, however, you'll want to consider a system that automatically populates, updates, and reports on your supply at all times. A POS system is the easiest way to manage online and offline orders so that you always have a clear idea of your inventory between the two.

6. Figure out shipping and fulfillment (several weeks)

It may not take you more than a day or two to research and pick a shipping service, but you should consider testing it before offering it to the masses. Make sure your shipper is poised to handle your items by doing a few test runs. You'll want to ensure everything arrives on time and in good condition.

If you see issues in the way items are arriving, it may be time to reconsider several aspects of this process. For example, maybe you need to alter your packaging, or you might need a different shipping partner altogether.

7. Build your online marketing presence (several weeks)

Most brick-and-mortar businesses have done some sort of online marketing (or at least they should). Scaling your efforts to include [**more online-specific messaging**](#) shouldn't be too challenging, but it could take time.

If you don't already own your social media handles or you don't use them effectively, make the commitment to remedy this. Also, consider harnessing the power of email newsletters to send out personalized promotions and hype your newest endeavor.

8. Staff for new needs (several weeks)

From handling tech to packing and shipping, you may need at least one or two people to help with this (to start). This can mean promoting part-time workers to full-time or hiring entirely new employees. Just make sure you don't rush, otherwise you risk a bad hire.

Summary

From cupcake shops to sneaker stands, the wide variety of success stories coming out over the past year have inspired many businesses to take a similar chance with making the leap to online. Even after investing your time and employee resources, you may not see the big returns right away. However, this shouldn't discourage you from making a natural next step to the web.

Expect to spend between three to six months to plan and market before you get your store fully functional and see real sales. After that, it may take another 6 months to a year to see a significant ROI. With a [**proper plan for scaling**](#) that doesn't overspend on resources, you can meet your customers' needs in a new way while future-proofing your business.

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