



Why You Should Add E-Commerce to Your Business

Here is a fact of life: If you do not offer e-commerce within your print shop, you are losing business to someone who does. There will always be a certain percentage of the population who is not going to take the time to physically walk into shop, whether it's because your business hours are not convenient for them or that your location is not easy to get to. They would rather get on their computer at 11:00 pm on a Saturday night and order what they need, because that's when they have time to do it.

Another reason for e-commerce is to build your customer connection. Someone who goes to your website and has a good experience is way more likely to come into your shop if they need personal assistance. This gives you the critical opportunity to establish and strengthen that relationship, ultimately leading to more revenue.

A website also lets you serve your clientele on a 24-hour basis, and expands your sales all across the United States. Customers might turn to the Internet because their local suppliers do not have the capabilities they need, and you want to make sure you're accessible.

An attractive, informative website is important even for customers who do

come to your location. When choosing where to go, most consumers will spend an hour or more online looking at the options before picking a place to visit. In this contest, the best website always wins. You also can greatly reduce the amount of unpaid time you spend with a new customer explaining what you offer, how to order and all the options when all of this info is available in an easy-to-understand format online.

The bottom line is that modern consumers shop both ways: instore and online. You want to be sure to offer both options to maximize your opportunities. It's also important to realize that an e-commerce site generates awareness and promotes your business. Maybe your company does not offer exactly what they are looking for at the moment, but when they do have a need for a product or service you offer, they will have had that exposure to your site.

Create an Online Catalog

Another reality is that most printers do not stock all the blank products offered, nor are they on display in the showroom. A website makes it easier to display an

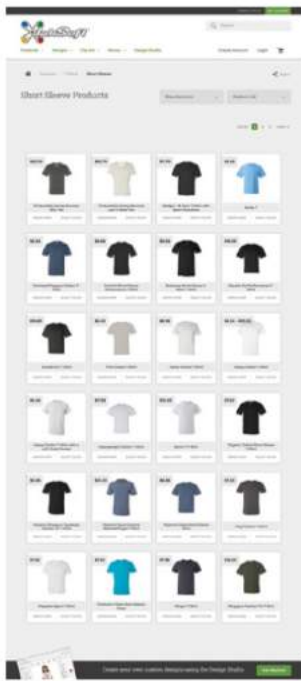
entire line of products in a flip book or online catalog — most buyers prefer sitting at a computer versus walking around a showroom floor or store. If they find what they are looking for online, then they will want to make a trip to the location to see a sample.

Another perk of an online catalog is the ease of keeping it up to date. When a style is discontinued, it only takes a few moments to take it off the site and add new selections. This makes it easier to highlight seasonal merchandise and respond quickly to trends. Rather than having to tediously input all this info, it's a matter of scrolling through the choices and clicking on which ones you want. Pricing is also uploaded, and most e-commerce programs allow you to program an automatic markup.

You can even follow the trend that many apparel wholesalers are utilizing, which is to offer a catalog available for download. Not only is there a professional photo, but also product descriptions, sizes, colors, pricing and more.



By JP Hunt, Co-Founder, Inksoft



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E-Commerce Makes it Easy

Convenience plays a major role in the success of e-commerce. For example, think about holiday products like a Christmas T-shirt, banner or sign. There are many people who are happy to order this online, but would never get in the car and drive to a store to buy it.

Convenience also makes e-commerce a no-brainer when fundraising for a wide range of schools and groups. Parents, students, fans and members are directed to a website where they can purchase what they want. The decorator collects the money, produces and fulfills the orders, and the organization gets a check for simply promoting the fundraising website. It's a win-win for all.

Crunching Numbers

When it comes to profit, e-commerce requires less overhead costs to complete. You end up saving money on the salesperson who would otherwise be tied up taking the order and collecting the payment. If you are offering a sales commission, you save that, too.

You also save the costs of human error. The customer is filling in all the information online versus a salesperson inputting or writing down the order. Therefore, you eliminate the possibility of an employee making a mistake that causes the owner to have to replace the printed product and eat the cost of the original.

In some circumstances, these savings can be passed onto the customer in terms of discount. Many businesses offers discounted pricing for clients who order online, which also helps to generate more business.

A Growing Trend

There's no question that e-commerce continues to increase its share of the retail pie every year, and technology is evolving to more closely replicate the touch and feel advantage that instore shopping offers. One example is 3D online imaging. There are companies that provide turnkey photography and digital processing services that replace static images with a 360-degree view. Videos also help companies better display their decorating and printing services, and they instill a sense of trust and security in customers who are buying online.

Further, an e-commerce website provides companies with a way to do their own product testing and market research. Any product can be displayed for free, allowing printers to put new products online at no risk and see what the response is.

Getting Started

Many printers who have no background or experience with how to create a website are overwhelmed to the degree that they don't know where to start. A great way to ease into the process is to think of your initial website as an online business card. You want to include contact information and a description of your products and services, then build from there.

Once you've made the decision to get started, the next step is to spend time researching industry providers and see which one is the best fit for you. Most segments of the printing industry have providers who have specialized in Web stores for printed products, whether you are selling decorated apparel, signage or graphics.



Ecommerce is a great way to provide information to customers so that you spend less time doing a presentation and getting an order in the shop. Employees can focus on production versus selling. Photo courtesy of Mind's Eye Graphics, Decatur, Ind.

You can save a lot of time and frustration by choosing a supplier that knows your business and its unique requirements. Ideally, you want a package that is simple and comes with good training materials and support. It should be possible for someone with average computer skills and a reasonable amount of training to set up the software and administer the site.

Pay particular attention to how the program manages accounting. When you're dealing with different websites and order data from a network of Web stores, this can quickly become a nightmare if order processing and management are not streamlined and organized from one central location.

The biggest goal to strive for — aside from revenue, of course — is to have your

website reflect your company's philosophy and branding. You want to make sure that your e-commerce capabilities meet your customers' expectations. When getting started, you may want to ask friends and family what kinds of things they would expect to see on a website offering printing or signage services. Once you've picked the right provider, invest, commit, develop and promote it. The biggest thing is to do just get started and do it.

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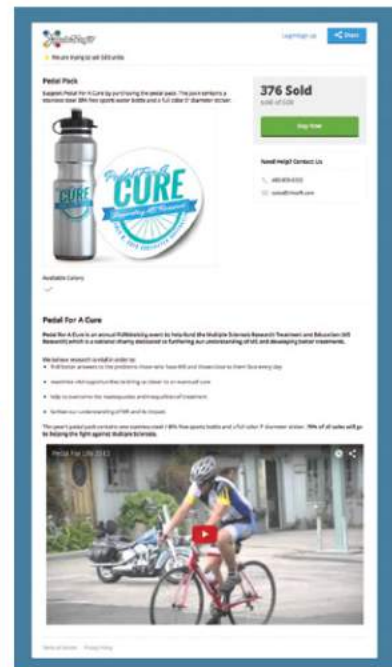
Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona. He continued on to complete a master's degree in business administration. You can contact Hunt at jphunt@inksoft.com, or visit the website at www.inksoft.com.



An online catalog allows you to easily show a customer all the products and services you can offer, not just what might fit in your showroom or warehouse. It's also simple to add and delete products keeping your catalog always up to date. Photo courtesy of Mind's Eye Graphics, Decatur, Ind.



Convenience plays a part in ecommerce success. Some customers will see a seasonal product online and buy it where as they would never get in the car and drive to the store to make the same purchase. Photo courtesy of Dalco Athletic, Dallas, Texas.



Convenience also is what makes ecommerce a no-brainer for fundraising for a wide range of schools and groups. Parents, students, fans, and members are directed to a website where they can purchase what they want. The decorator collects the money, produces and fulfills the orders, and the organization gets a check for simply promoting the fund-raising website. It's a win-win for all. T-shirts, decals, and a variety of promotional products make great fund-raisers.



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