HOW TO
SELL
ONLINE

→ Get your business selling online in a few simple steps

Tips for limited budgets, expanding your footprint, selling on social media sites, sales tax, regulations, international selling info, and more. ←

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There are many options when deciding where and how to sell online. Start with your goals. Who are your target customers? Where do they currently shop online? What look and feel do they deem "credible" to buy from? Have a blueprint in your business plan—to get to your first million in sales, how many units need to be sold?

Now you're ready to...

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① ASSESS ALL YOUR SELLING OPTIONS

Only focus on one ecommerce site or plugin at a time. Do not attempt more channels until one is optimized.

Before you start selling products online, **do your homework**. Find out industry norms for where and how to sell your product. Check out competitor placements, and margins achievable on various platforms. The table below compares current popular ways to sell online:

	WEBSITE	FACEBOOK	ETSY	TWITTER	PINTEREST	AMAZON	GOOGLE
Description	Sell on your e-commerce website. You design it and direct buyers to it.	Sell on the new shop section. Add a shop button to your page.	Sell on this ecommerce platform. Etsy is your online store-front.	Sell products you feature on Twitter as images.	Sell products you feature on Pinterest as images.	Sell your inventory on Amazon instead of your own store.	Sell online and in-store inventory on Merchant Center.
Audience	Whomever you tell about it, whether via social media, ads or other.	Targeted audience you refine—local or anywhere in the world.	Anyone directed to your store or customers searching Etsy for your products.	Your followers, or anyone who sees your posts.	Your followers, or anyone who sees your pins. Mostly female audience.	Anyone searching for the items you are selling on Amazon.	Targeted audience you refine—local or anywhere in the world.
Other Info	[View a comparison chart of all available platforms here](#).	Utilized mostly by retail businesses. Option to purchase on your website.	Mostly a female audience. Meant for crafts or eccentric items.	Can only plug into Twitter if you're using specific ecommerce platforms.	Can only plug into Pinterest if you're using specific ecommerce platforms.	[This professional selling guide discusses discounts, large volume and more.](#)	[Considered shopping campaigns or shopping ads.](#)
How To	See the site host you select for instructions on how to build.	1. [Set up a Facebook shop.](#) 2. [Another good article to set up.](#)	[Visit Etsy's how to section to get started.](#)	[Visit Twitter's how to section to get started.](#)	[Visit Pinterest's how to section to get started.](#)	[Visit Amazon's selling services site to get started.](#)	[Visit the Google Merchant Center for more info.](#)

PRO TIP It is always a good idea to have a website for your business whether you sell with it or not. It is a tool for you to feature where your products are sold, as well as more information about your business.

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2 CHOOSE A WEBSITE HOST

First things first! When you register your URL, be sure to: (1) research your chosen company name. Do a "knock out" search for Federal & State trademarks (or consult an attorney), and a Google search for who is already using the name, and if it's directly related.

(2) Register every online account available for your business name on social media, preventing theft in the future. Also, secure all similar domain names for better SEO.

You have many options when it comes to choosing where and how to create your site.

Review your options before you begin:

Build-Your-Own Drag and Drop Full Site with Ecommerce	Other info aside from product your selling will appear on site.	Easy to build for a novice.	You aren't responsible for costly site repairs, but you are subject to	*Host Options:* Weebly Wix Squarespace More
Build-Your-Own Drag and Drop Ecommerce-Only Site	Bare minimum info appears on the site—the site is only a storefront.	Easy to build for a novice.	changes in policies and updates from the website company.	Shopify Bigcommerce Weebly Squarespace More
Build-Your-Own Content Management System (CMS) Site with or without ecommerce	Usually other info aside from product your selling will appear on site.	Can be complicated to build.	Not subject to changes in policies. You manage and pay for repairs.	Wordpress Joomla Drupal More
Outsource It	Can have other info appear, or just a storefront.	Someone else builds for you. Can be costly.	Website builder takes care of changes. You pay for repairs.	Talk to your builder about their site host options.

Need More Info?

This link gives an overview of the difference between CMS and drag-and-drop.
This link gives website and template options for purchase.

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3 CHOOSE AN ECOMMERCE PLATFORM

If you're building a drag and drop or CMS full site from the *previous page*, you will need to also select a company to host your ecommerce.

Hosted vs. Self-Hosted Ecommerce Source: Patrick's Programming Blog

Hosted e-commerce solutions are software that run on someone else's server, meaning you don't have access to the code that runs your site, and you use their website to make changes to your site. It works a lot like Facebook.

A self-hosted solution is software run on your own machine, and you own the store. You have access to the coding, and control updates. If you have technical problems you have to figure them out, ask for help, or pay for someone else to troubleshoot it for you. It functions like Microsoft Excel.

When choosing a solution, ask yourself a few questions:

1. Is your business just getting started?

If so, a hosted solution is probably right for you.

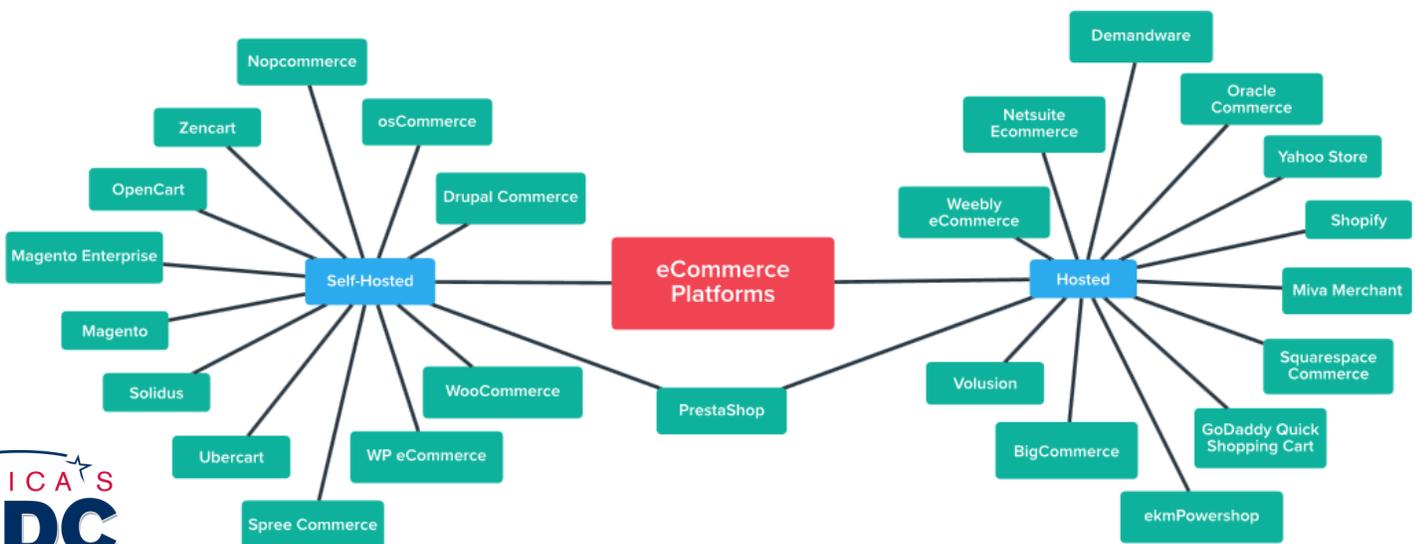**2. Do you/will you have very large sales volume online?**

If so, a self-hosted solution may be a better choice.

3. In either case, do you have the knowledge, expertise and time to dedicate to building your store properly?

If not, consider hiring a company to build it.

Read: Tips for Choosing a Web Designer

ECOMMERCE PLATFORM COMPANIES: COMPARE THEM

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4 REGULATIONS, TAXES & INTERNATIONAL SELLING INFO

Regulatory Considerations for Selling Online

For the most part, the steps to starting an online business are the same as starting any business. However, doing business online comes with additional legal and financial considerations, particularly in the areas of privacy, security, copyright, and taxation. Most regulations are covered by hosted sites and platforms, but if you are building your own site, abiding by regulations is more of a concern.

Read information on each topic by the Small Business Administration (SBA)

Collecting Sales Tax Online

If your business has a physical presence in a state, such as a store, office or warehouse, you must collect applicable state and local sales tax from your customers. If you do not have a presence in a particular state, you are not required to collect sales taxes. Hosted sites and platforms are generally programmed to calculate sales tax for you, but self-hosted sites need to build these capabilities in.

Read more information about taxation by the SBA

International Online Sales

Selling your products online allows for immediate entry into the global marketplace. However, shipping your product overseas presents a few challenges if you have little experience with taxes, duties, customs laws, and consumer protection issues involved with international commerce. Hosted sites and platforms are generally programmed to calculate taxes, but again, self-hosted requires it to be built in.

Understand legal and regulatory requirements when shipping overseas by the SBA
Export.gov E-Commerce Toolbox
Electronic Commerce: Selling Internationally A Guide for Businesses

Note: All information on this page was written by the SBA

5 DETERMINE
SHIPPING LOGISTICS

So...you've started your ecommerce website or platform and now you've sold your first item! Shipping is another key area to develop in your ecommerce plan.

PRO TIP: Most ecommerce sites do not generate customer facing shipping prices for you. You must calculate it yourself and add it into product costs on your site. Your shipping prices will be calculated by averages across locations, package size and weight, volume of shipments, carriers and more.

The Beginner's Guide to Ecommerce Shipping and Fulfillment by Shopify.com gives clear tips and instructions on how to ship smarter. Everything from packaging options and how to structure your rate, to business accounts and labeling is featured.
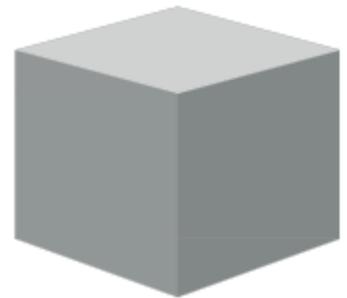
More Information:

- Companies like Shippo integrate with big name ecommerce sites to connect with multiple carriers, create discounted shipping labels, track parcels, and much more. This could be a good shipping option for your site.

- Some larger ecommerce sites display real-time carrier shipping rates directly to your customers when you pay for their higher-level pricing plans.

- Researching your competitors' shipping structure is a good idea when you start building your strategy. Learn more in this entrepreneur.com article.

Great info can be found from simple Google searches like "ecommerce shipping." A Small Business Guide to E-Commerce Shipping is another valuable online resource.

6 ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- **"Expect some channel conflict as a cost of doing business**," says Martin Zwilling in his [entrepreneur.com article](). "With multiple channels, there will always be inequities and disagreements. These must be dealt with openly, and in a proactive manner if at all possible." This means that you could have conflict with any platform you are selling on. Stay informed of their policies and monitor your monthly billing.

- **Always use analytics and listen directly to customer feedback.** Are you able to pinpoint where your customers are coming from online? Do you know how long they spend on your site or where they're getting stuck? Set up [Woopra](), [Mixpanel](), [Intercom]() to connect with customers or [Google Analytics]() for your website to measure results.

- **Do not wait until your site is perfect to launch.** The "perfect" site may never come, you will always be improving and refining. Trust yourself and get selling once basics are covered.

- [**Make an appointment**]() **with your [local SBDC Advisor]() when you're ready to launch.** Let our experts assess what you've set up and give final feedback. Don't forget to reach out to us if you have questions in the process, too!

1. Entrepreneur.com is a trusted resource for small business owners. Read a variety or articles about selling online from their expert writers:

https://www.entrepreneur.com/topic/selling-online

2. These blog articles give ecommerce newcomers a big picture view on how to sell online:

http://www.websitebuilderexpert.com/how-to-sell-online-ecommerce-solutions/

http://www.websitebuilderexpert.com/how-to-build-an-online-store/

3. This website touts itself as "The Ultimate Selling Online Guide". It compares many sites and platforms:

https://ecommerceguide.com/sell-online/

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