How To Start A Business That Actually Grows
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Meet our authors

Katey Ferenzi

Senior-level content marketing strategist and creator for B2B and B2C with a deep experience in structure, messaging, positioning, and branding in order to share the value of great products to the right audience. I help businesses tell their story, share their brand, increase quality traffic, and conversions through relevant content and tactical online advertising.

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I’m the senior content marketing manager over at BigCommerce where I manage all BigCommerce blog production, case study production, customer testimonials, GTM product launches and run point on beta programs. I also work with partners spanning the likes of Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, Instagram as well as agencies including the Gorilla Group, EYEmagine, Silk and so, so, so many more (350+ to be exact).
INTRODUCTION

How to (Realistically) Start an Online Business That Actually Grows

The most popular course at Stanford isn’t a STEM class. It isn’t in entrepreneurship nor coding. It is one in how to design a happy life.

The course is co-taught by Dave Evans, the former lead designer of Apple’s first mouse and co-founder of Electronic Arts.

In those positions, he learned how to design for user experience and remove unnecessary elements. Apple’s first mouse, if you remember, had one button rather than the conventional two of the time.

The same elements that go into designing for user experience, it turns out, work well for designing your happiest life. In fact, they work well for designing success in general.

The key is knowing your options and yourself.

“I have true agency over my work, because I know what I stand for and I have tools to fix the things that I encounter in my life,” Kanyi Maqubela told Fast Company about the course he took as a Student at Stanford. Today, Maqubela is an investment partner at an early-stage venture capital firm.

For those looking to start a new business venture, those dreaming of turning a side-gig into a full-time job and long-term, sustainable business, the key to your success is the same.

You must know your options. And you must know yourself.

It is hard to be successful as an online store. Competition is fierce and customer expectation even more so. The best offense to these industry realities is a planned defense — and knowing what you are getting yourself into before you ever begin.
Who is this guide for?

- Are you planning on starting a brand new ecommerce business?
- Are you looking to expand your business to an independent webstore from an online marketplace or a brick-and-mortar?
- Are you planning to take your B2B business directly to consumers with a B2C site?

This guide will walk you through everything you need to know to be successful for the long-term.

You’ll find in it dozens of success stories from entrepreneurs selling across the web, whose sage advice you’d be wise to take.

You’ll also get step-by-step instructions for how to determine your product niche, how to size up your competition, and how to determine market viability for today, tomorrow and next year.

BigCommerce powers thousands of online stores making billions in online revenue. Most of these stores didn’t exist a decade ago, many still not even five years ago.

It is possible to build a legacy brand beginning right now.

It won’t be easy. It will take know-how and strategy. It will take dedicated design from day one.

But do it right, and your business will bypass those one-hit-wonder brands to become something much more than a dream, a side gig or a even a small business.

It will become your personal legacy, providing jobs for hundreds and changing hearts and minds, one checkout at a time.

Buckle up. You’re about to go on a deep planning dive to prepare your business for long-term success.

Selling yourself short isn’t an option.

It’s go big or go home, and it starts right here.
CHAPTER 1

What to Sell in 2017: How to Find a Product Niche and Start Selling Online

Katey Ferenzi
CHAPTER 1

What to Sell in 2017:
How to Find a Product Niche and Start Selling Online

Online competition is fiercer than ever. This is why figuring out what to sell online is a strategy in and of itself.

You’d be surprised how many people set up a store before they know what they will sell. This is setting yourself up for failure.

Choosing the right products to sell will impact every other business decision you make. Forget a pretty theme. Forget a catchy company name. Forget which shipping options you offer.

They’re all important, but the most important thing you must get right from the very beginning is exactly what you sell and how you price those products.

No matter what industry you pick, there are really only two kinds of products and both can sell really well.

First, there’s what we call commoditized products. These are the products everybody needs. Think of anything you buy at Walmart or Amazon that has a big brand behind it — food, golf clubs, clothes, kids toys, etc. Now think of the brands — Heinz, Callaway, Levi, Fisher-Price.

There are also products we refer to as unique products. These are usually one-of-a-kind, handmade products. They are products made in small batch runs or products that are made on demand. Think of a unique beaded necklace, hand-made frozen yogurt or leather iPad cases.

Many brands sell a combination of commoditized products and unique products. Take a look at Spearmint Love, for instance. This site aggregates baby clothes from across the web (commoditized), as well as offers a few unique products of their own.

Offering only commoditized items, especially if those items are brand name or already sold on
major marketplaces like Amazon or Walmart, will make it extremely difficult to be successful. Amazon and Walmart can buy items in large quantities, lowering the price of the product. Your startup likely won’t be able to compete.

However, if you can offer unique products alongside commoditized ones (think of using Etsy Wholesale or reaching out to makers on Instagram) and build a great brand experience along the way, you are setting yourself up for success.

Coming up with unique products can be difficult, though. Here are six different ways to generate ideas when trying to decide what to sell online.

1. Improve on Fragmented Frustrations

We’ve all heard the saying: necessity is the mother of invention.

Taking this tack when generating ideas for a product or service is a reliable avenue to kickstart a successful business.

Opportunities may exist in a few forms, including an improved product feature, a market unrealized by your competitors, or even unique marketing.

Try tuning into your everyday tasks. What things put a hitch in your giddyup? Those small annoyances can turn out to be a brilliant business idea. Pinpoint a problem and conveniently solve it.

Your product or service doesn’t necessarily need to be a huge, complicated endeavor. It can be quite simple, yet exceptionally effective. As an example, look at the story behind Karen Rzepecki’s invention of the reCAP Mason Jars Pour Cap.
“Our story began with salad dressing,” she writes. “After creating yet another oily mess with the lid and ring, I searched for a pour cap that would fit my Mason Jars and allow me to shake, pour, and store dressing.”

Rzepecki realized there wasn’t one, so she went ahead and created something all her own.

As many do, Rzepecki used reusable, ecofriendly mason jars for food storage. However, when trying to shake, pour and store items, things got sticky. To alleviate the issue, Rzepecki created a simple lid with a spout that fit both large- and small-mouth mason jars and took her new product online.

Today, she owns a successful online store and is diversifying her product offering to scale her ROI.

“Our sales have increased this year, and we are spending a lot more time relooking at our SEO,” says Rzepecki. “Just recently we switched over to PayPal by Braintree so we could take advantage of the simplified checkout as well as selling on Pinterest. With that, our checkout was immediately improved. It’s all part of our work to improve our customer experience as much as we can.”
2. Build on Passion and Experience

Let's be honest, starting your own business means long hours, likely some rocky terrain and the occasional, if not frequent, sacrifice.

Being passionate about what you do will not only help you see the forest through the trees during the hard times, but it will also help you in crafting a brand that speaks to people in a way that is meaningful and engaging.

Putting Love and Life to Work

Evan Streusand launched his very first business years ago after a trip to South America. There, he found a group of shoemakers working in a fair wage factory. He made friends, had drinks, and when he came back to the U.S., he launched Fortress of Inca to help support the efforts of his new friends.

Today, he sells those shoes to brands like Anthropologie and Free People.

Before Thanksgiving 2016, he decided to open an additional venture — this time with his partner. The launch story was oddly similar.

The two traveled to West Texas. They stumbled upon a pair of robes in an outpost, and over the course of their vacation, found themselves not wanting to take them off.

They had drinks with the locals — in their robes. They went out two-stepping — in their robes. They stargazed and watched the Texas sun rise over the butt of the Rocky Mountains — in their robes.

When they came back to Austin, with new friends and experiences in their pockets, they launched Highway Robbery.

“Highway Robbery really feels like an extension of who we are and our personalities,” says Evan.

“We love coming up with new ideas, and this particular project has got our minds going in a million different directions. From the fabrics we want to use to the photo shoots we’re planning down to the text we want to use on our website — it’s all exciting at the moment.” Oh, and puns. We love puns. Expect us to use a lot of them, be they good or bad!”
3. Craft a Brand that Resonates

Creating a brand that resonates is particularly important if you’re thinking of pursuing a competitive ecommerce industry.

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 a Brand Becomes a Lifestyle

When it comes to crafting a brand and experience that resonate, Tyler Merritt of Nine Line is an expert.

Merritt’s goal when launching Nine Line, a patriotic apparel company, was to cater to his fellow veterans and those still serving in the armed forces. He quickly realized, however, that this patriotic flair hit a resonating tone with his fellow Americans as a whole.

“We like to promote patriotism,” says Tyler. “We believe in certain things that might be considered controversial. We don’t think they should be. You can not agree with public policy, but to service members and other individuals, the American flag represents something that’s sacred. That’s our personal opinion.”

Tyler promotes the Nine Line brand through every single aspect of the business, from the t-shirts to well designed emails and product packaging. The patriotic and respectful spirit even flows through his hiring processes. The company hires 100% veterans.
4. Hop on Trends Early

Carving out a place for your brand within an emerging market is ideal.

To do this, it is 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.

This business angle can be a slippery slope, given that many trends don’t last. However, the upside can be tremendous for a small business owner, as you’ll have a leg up on SEO and establish yourself as a leader within the industry from early on.

Start thinking of products or services that have been trending up in recent years (e.g., technology, survival gear, vintage, healthy living, flash tattoos).

Launch Before the Craze

Serving as proof that launching in the right market at the right time leads to success, online store Fugoo was built on the backs of team members who played integral roles at Acer, eMachines, Harmon Kardon, JBL and Toshiba.

The Fugoo team even won “Best of CES” awards in 2015. These awards given out typically to brands like Apple and Google when they show off new, unseen technology and products.

“Fugoo’s team is comprised of award-winning industry leaders who have been integral in the creation of many key technology industry milestones, including driving the development and industry adoption of Bluetooth,” reads their website.

In all, the Fugoo team used their skills and industry knowledge to launch the Fugoo Bluetooth wireless speaker just before the bigger technology brands caught on to the trend.
5. Fulfill Guilty Pleasures

Another solid business avenue to pursue is catering to customers' passions, or even their vices. Shoppers often spend more on their guilty pleasures, developing deep loyalty to brands that understand their obsessions.

Take Jeni’s Ice Cream for example. Founder Jeni Britton Bauer has been making ice cream professionally for decades, and founded her own brand in 2002. Sure, she was ahead of the organic and all-natural trends, using whole ingredients and dairy from grass-matured cows from the very beginning. She also added an artistic flair to her flavors, calling on every ice cream lover’s guilty pleasure – trying the newest, creamiest versions.

Today, customers can order ice cream online and have it shipped to their door, removing all barriers to getting that creamy goodness to their mouths faster than ever possible before.
Jeni’s Mission Statement:

“We are absolutely devoted to making better ice creams and bringing people together. It’s what gets us out of bed in the morning and keeps us up late at night. We believe that you can grow a business as a community of people, with artful attention to detail and the customer experience, and get continuously better at the same time. That REALLY great ice cream served perfectly in a sparkling and beautiful space, with attentive and in-the-moment service (we believe service is an art) brings people together and helps them connect. And that sometimes sparks fly. And that there should be more sparks flying, generally. We like to make people feel good.”
6. Serve Niche Segments

Niche segments often spell success for ecommerce.

Take, for example, Berkey Water.

Berkey Water is a water purification system unlike anything else on the market. You could put radioactive sludge in it and it would pull out drinkable water for you.

It is that good.

And because it is that good, it has niche markets which are increasingly loyal to the brand. For instance, the prepper market — full of individuals who are readying for disaster 24/7. Or, the health and cancer recovery segment — where individuals are looking for the absolute cleanest water possible. Plenty of other shopping segments love the Berkey Water filter, as well, but their success has long been hinged on markets on the lookout for the absolute best in water purification.

And the love that these segments have for the product is proven in their testimonials:

![Product Reviews](image)

1. LOVE BIG BERKEY  *****
   Posted by Mike Quan on 4th Jan 2017
   I use the Big Berkey for EVERYTHING from making my morning coffee, to cooking and filling water jugs for camping trips. Best tasting water anywhere.

2. Excellent Product  *****
   Posted by Lori on 22nd Aug 2016
   I am extremely happy with all aspects of this product. It has become an essential part of my family’s daily life. The quality of the water is amazing and much better than any other filter I have ever used.

3. Instructions Unclear  *****
   Posted by Deanna Loomis on 3rd Jul 2016
   The only thing that I see that could be improved with the Berkeys is that the instructions seem very unclear. It might be worth having them redone in order that the purchaser is not left with a “what in the world?” kind of impression, which results in needing to look up on YouTube how to install it. Especially unclear seems to be the description on how to prime the filters.
   Thank you for requesting my review!
   NMCL Reply: Thank you so much for your suggestion. We’re working on this!

4. Great Buy  *****
   Posted by Patrick Bulger on 23rd Jun 2016
   Water tastes great
   No more drinking water sitting in a plastic container post filter/leaching BPA/BPFx.
7. Spot Business Opportunities Absolutely Everywhere

If the above suggestions aren’t resonating, here are a few ways to find great business ideas in your everyday life.

- **Start taking people seriously when they give you compliments.** What is it that people tell you you’re great at? Perhaps family and friends can’t get enough of your online reviews. This is exactly how Spearmint Love started. Founder Shari Lott was a once-time baby clothes blogger and reviewer. Soon, she realized she was gaining more traffic and praise than many of the brands she promoted. So, she decided to start calling in wholesale orders and selling the goods herself. Today, Spearmint Love is a wildly successful brand, and Sheri is a well-known trend-spotter in the industry.

- **Start snooping around websites like eBay, Amazon and Etsy.** You’ll be amazed at the simple things being sold online, including vintage items found at a thrift store, party lights, dog toys, tablecloths, decorative pillows and wedding decor. Checkout a site like GolfEtail which uses eBay as an additional sales channel to significantly increase overall brand revenue.

- **Think about a new spin for old items.** Even just giving something a new paint job can turn a $5 item into a $50 gem. Check out the angle Bread & Jam took on standard items you’d likely find anywhere, turning them into treasured pieces.

- **Consider impulse buys or items people buy regularly.** This could include items like incense, candles, novelties and DVDs. Dog for Dog took typical products like dog food and treats to a whole new level with donations and celebrity endorsements.
CHAPTER 2

How to Evaluate Market Viability for Your Products

Katey Ferenzi
How to Evaluate Market Viability for Your Products

There are many things to consider when discussing the market potential for your product, including the ability for your business to produce profit and ultimately scale.

Formal research tools like concept testing, prototype testing, test markets and focus groups can help determine the market viability of a product. However, these can be complex, expensive and time-consuming.

To make it easier, we’ve compiled a list of things to consider when determining if there’s a commercial market for your product.

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

- Is the idea practical?
- What obstacles lie ahead?
- Will it need support services of some kind to ensure customer satisfaction?

After you answer those, it’s time to consider the more tactical aspects of your product and business.

1. 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’re going to have some high shipping costs. UPS & FedEx raised prices fluctuate, which could further impact your costs.

Think you can pass the cost of shipping on to your customers? Not necessarily so. Shipping cost is a top reason for cart abandonment.
Online retailers that offer free shipping increase conversion, and free shipping is now even considered the norm by many in the industry.

Free shipping however is tightening profit margins across all industries. In order to stay competitive while generating revenue, your best bet is to keep your product small and minimize shipping costs.

2. 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. They also usually cost less to store.

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

3. Consider SKUs

Many entrepreneurs forget that a single item can often contain multiple SKUs.

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

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).

Don’t let SKUs discourage you, but do be aware of the additional costs and reparations for product mix ups during fulfillment. Also be aware that there are plenty of tools and resources to help you with inventory management to streamline this process.
4. Consider Product Lifespan

Having a consumable or disposable product is great from a business perspective, because it provides you a better opportunity to earn consumer trust and build your business off of repeat sales.

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

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.

The Downside of Pursuing Perishable Products

There are many successful businesses out there that sell perishable products, including:

- The Cake Store: Beautifully crafted and ornate cakes for every occasion
- Jeni’s Ice Cream: Quality, handmade ice cream and frozen yogurt with unique flavors
- Joe Knows Reefs: Rare and exotic live ocean corals
- Tortoise Supply: Live tortoises

However, there are some obstacles to overcome with this type of product, including storage, shipping and production.

You’ll need to set proper expectations for clients on timelines and cost to help overcome reservations around purchasing.

Tortoise Supply does a particularly good job of providing details around who they are, how they care for and ship the animals they sell, how customers should care for them, and more. As a result, they’re considered a thought leader in the pet shop space, offering a personalized and convenient experience that their customers prefer to local pet shops.
5. 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 audience is located (your winter could be their summer).

Seasonality is not an exact science and there are multiple solutions to the issue, including running timely promotions and shipping internationally.

Seasonality does affect revenue for all online stores, making seasons like the holidays much more profitable for some — whereas a back-to-school event could be more profitable for others. You’ll need to determine your own business downtime, and work to off-set expectations and costs during those periods.

6. Consider Solving for Pain Points

Selling a product that solves for a pain point doesn’t necessarily prevent you from offering a luxury item. Check out Luxury of Watches, Ballettonet and Coast of New Zealand for some examples of lovely luxury items that are also functional.
That said, 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 than if you sell a luxury item.

Rock Tape solves a literal pain point for a large consumer segment — athletes and those in physical therapy — by producing a product that alleviates physical pain and discomfort.

7. 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.

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.
8. Consider Yourself

Yes, on top of choosing a product that’s viable in the market, you should select one that you actually enjoy yourself.

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.

Next up, we’ll dive into some areas that tend to get folks hung up when starting an online store.
How to Conduct Online Market Research for your Ecommerce Business

Katey Ferenzi
Conducting market research for your small business idea 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 to be certain you have an accurate picture of your market and make the best business decision possible.

1. 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 name, descriptions, blog posts and your 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.

Google has gotten wise to entrepreneurs using this tool to conduct keyword research for their online businesses. When you go to create an account with Google Adwords to start using the Keyword Planner, you will be prompted to start an account, enter a dollar amount and possibly even enter credit card information.

Don’t panic. Go ahead and enter in $1.00 and then make sure to suspend the campaign before you finish creating your account. You won’t need to start an actual campaign at this point.

2. Find Trends and Put the Big Picture in Perspective

Another cool Google tool you can use is Google Trends.

Do 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 go all the way back to 2005, as of this writing). You can also compare the volume of searches between a few terms, geographic locales and even view how particular events affect search popularity.
3. Examine Social Media

Examining 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 their language so 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.

First, take a look into hashtags and what’s trending overall.

Use Instagram’s search tool the same way you did Google Trends. 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 socially active community.
4. Build an Online Store and Test the Waters to Gain Momentum

Dive in and open an online store.

You can do this long before your product or service is ever developed to start driving traffic or even to collect some pre-orders. This tactic can help you gain immediate feedback from your target consumer or gauge demand for your product before manufacturing or buying inventory.

Create some ads on Google and Facebook and spread the news via word-of-mouth. You’ll be able to start attracting potential customers who can provide feedback, sign up for your mailing list, or be placed on a waitlist to be notified when the product has launched.

The investment community is more likely give money to a company that has shown proven market demand by collecting pre-orders or signups from real consumers.

A word of caution: make sure your website is clear in communicating that your product or service
is not ready to ship. Also, provide an estimated date for release and details around whether or not you will provide refunds. You’re not trying to take people for a ride — you simply want to test the waters and gain momentum to carry you to the next step.

**Routes to Building an Audience without a Product**

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

**Launch a Narrative Brand**

Narrative brand’s do incredibly well online. This is because they use content to drive organic traffic and engage audiences on social media platforms. Casper is a great example of a narrative brand. Their Van Winkle blog attracts hundreds and thousands of monthly readers — giving rise to the overall Casper brand and building long-term trust with readers.

Spearmint Love is another brand which used a narrative long before selling any products (read more about their incredible story here). Sheri Lott started the Spearmint Baby Blog is 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, Sheri decided to launch her own store, selling the items she most loved.

Today, Spearmint Love has hundreds and thousands of followers, and is about to relaunch the blog to continue educating and engaging customers for the long-haul.
Use Kickstarter or IndieGoGo

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 communication access and eventually product-touting 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.

Redshift Sports, for example, used Kickstarter to build support for their cycling-niche product, quickly earning all needed funds to build the product and getting press coverage as well. The team still uses Kickstarter to test new ideas and launch new products.

Native Union follows a similar strategy on IndieGoGo. New products are launched on that platform, and when they gain enough support, the team builds the product and launches it on their site.

5. Leverage Your 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
- Ecommerce Entrepreneurs Facebook Group
- Marketers and Founders Facebook Group
- Startup Slack Channel
- Bootstrapped Chat Slack Channel
- Side Project Slack Channel
- #SmallBiz Slack Channel

6. Scope the Competition

You’ll want to take a look at your competition at this point in time to get a 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.

So often those businesses that come to market first make mistakes in the uncharted territory. Think about MySpace and Facebook or even Yahoo and Google. Often, the second-comer wins customer loyalty.

7. Google It

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

In the next chapter, you’ll learn how to categorize your competitors before you conduct a complete competitive analysis.
CHAPTER 4

How to Conduct a Competitive Analysis for Your Online Business [with templates]

Katey Ferenzi
CHAPTER 4

How to Conduct a Competitive Analysis for Your Online Business [with templates]

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

You want to make sure shoppers have a reason to pick you over everyone else.

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

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.

1. Categorize Your Competitors

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

This chapter details a simple, easy-to-use process that will help you discover and keep tabs on your competition.

Afterward, you’ll be able to capitalize on their weaknesses and their strengths to help start your business. You’ll have a better understanding of the landscape, plus learn how to best position your business for success.

Learn how to identify, understand and keep tabs on your competition so you never have to worry about them sneaking up behind you.
Find Your Competitors
There are many ways to identify key competitors in your industry, but Google and Amazon will likely be where you do most of your legwork. Start with a simple search for your business name, product ideas and overarching business idea.

From there, check out different social media channels, 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 direct competitors to businesses that don’t currently compete with you, but could easy pivot.

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, keep things organized in a spreadsheet or database.

To start, track the basics; name of store, location, mission statement (if they have one), product offering, strengths and weaknesses of their business, and category of competition.

Get Started Now
Here’s a downloadable Competitive Analysis Template spreadsheet you can use to track your competitors and stay organized as you do your competitive research.
2. 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 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, but to help you start thinking as a dynamic business owner.
3. 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?
- What makes their product or service unique (according to them)?

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
- 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

4. Take a Peek at Pricing

Your pricing strategy is going to be one of the most important aspects of your online business, and there are several factors to be considered when setting prices for your products.

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.

5. 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, e.g, personalization, gift cards, etc.?

6. Take a Temperature Check with Reviews

This is just a no-brainer. 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.
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.

7. Review Social Media

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 at 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 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. This could include things like knitting groups, forums, meetup groups, blogs and beyond.

8. Bonus Items and Tools

- 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.

Continue on to learn how to identify your target market and begin promoting your business to potential customers.
10 Online Business Laws You Need to Know for Internet Selling

Katey Ferenzi
10 Online Business Laws You Need to Know for Internet Selling

After you’ve evaluated your online business idea and have a plan for product sourcing, it’s wise to research the 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.

1. 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.

For instance, 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, VAT tax applies to all non-essential goods. In California, items you sell in plastic bottles will carry a $0.11 recycling fee, in addition to other taxes.

To cover all your bases, talk to a tax professional or whatever local authority is available to you.
They will be able to help you understand specific instances 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 reseller certificates.

Keep in mind, too, that this information — and the regulations around it — is 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.

2. Payment Gateways

There are many payment gateways available for ecommerce businesses.

Don’t feel limited by the fact that many of them will 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, in addition to whether they are hosted or non-hosted, include anti-fraud features, or require transaction fees, termination fees, monthly fees or setup fees.

BIGCOMMERCE PAYMENT PROCESSING PARTNERS

BigCommerce connects with multiple payment gateways so you can choose which is right for your business. Learn more about the most commonly used:

- PayPal powered by Braintree
- Square
- Stripe
- 2Checkout
- First Data
- QuickBooks Online
- SecureNet
3. Trademarks, Patents and Copyrights

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

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.

4. Shipping Restrictions

Most shipping companies clearly note their restricted items.

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.

Typically restrictions are placed on items like:

- Aerosols
- Air bags
- Alcoholic beverages
• Ammunition
• Animals
• Cigarettes
• Dry ice
• Explosives
• Fresh fruits and vegetables
• Hazardous materials
• Nail polish
• Perfumes
• Perishables
• 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 your provider.

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.

5. Inventory

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.

6. Age Restrictions

Anytime you launch a website, it’s essential to comply with the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).
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 that tailors 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. Sites seeing items like Tasers need to have age verification tools before checkout in order to be legally sold, for instance.

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.

7. 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 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.

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

8. 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 also a great resource that can not only help with licensing, but also with some of the 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.”

9. 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.

However, make sure to educate yourself. 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).

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, 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.

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.
CHAPTER 6

How to Identify and Analyze Your Target Market in 2017

Katey Ferenzi
CHAPTER 6

How to Identify and Analyze Your Target Market in 2017

Although your products might appeal to a large group of people, it doesn’t make sense to market to everyone.

Your brand will have what is called 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.

First, figure out 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. If your product or service is brand new, a good alternative might be looking at your competitors to get additional insights.

The toughest part of this process is you must avoid making assumptions.

For example, if you want to start a handmade pet biscuit business, you are probably an expert on their many benefits. But don’t assume consumers know these things as well. They may not even know such a product exists. As tempting as this 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 possibly change your target market. Your target market is absolutely dynamic.

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.

In this chapter, you’ll learn how to conduct the research to accurately answer the following 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?

Let’s dive in.

1. Gather Intel

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

Some of the business questions you’ll be addressing include:

- 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?
2. Create Customer Profiles and Segments

Those consumers who find your product or service appealing often share similar characteristics, which will help you fine-tune your messaging from top to bottom.

You can craft a customer profile to uncover those shared traits. This includes psychographic data about how they behave, and basic information to help you identify your audience.

Demographic criteria will get you started:

- Age
- Location
- Gender
- Income level
- Education level
- Marital or family status
- Occupation
- Ethnic background

Psychographic criteria goes a little deeper, painting 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.
Don’t be afraid to make adjustments and include criteria that add interesting layers to your profiles — the better you know your customer, the better you can sell to them.

3. Be Specific

Narrowly defining your target customer is more of an art than a science.

As you get started, try to be as specific as possible. By starting with a detailed customer profile, you’ll be able to make the most 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 to who your audience truly is: their attitudes, beliefs, and 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.

4. 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, 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 to help get you started:

- Quantcast provides free, accurate and dependable audience insights for over 100 million web and mobile destinations
- Alexa transforms raw data into meaningful insights that will help you find your competitive advantage
- Google Trends uncovers where your target customers are predominantly located
• 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.

All of this information will help you learn more about your target audience so you can develop a strong brand identity.

5. Look at Your Competition

In the last chapter, we showed you how to complete a competitive analysis. Now take all 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 the same exact market.

On the other hand, if their customers are extremely unsatisfied with current offerings, you may want to jump in. A smart business person will identify competitors’ weaknesses and overlooked areas of the market, and capitalize on them to drive business success.

6. 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 hear the voice of your customer and get answers to specific questions about 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.

7. 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?

Answering these questions will help you understand if you are truly ready to jump into business or if you need to pivot your online store (and its potential products) to appeal to a different market.

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 ideal clientele may change. Get ahead of the curve, and you’ll also be one step ahead of your competition.
CHAPTER 7

How to Manufacture and Source Products for Your Online Business

Katey Ferenzi
How to Manufacture and Source Products for Your Online Business

Congrats, you’ve gotten through the most critical first step of starting an online store — selecting the perfect products to sell.

Now you need to figure out how you’ll source those 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, common pitfalls and the steps to successfully selling online.

You have three primary sourcing options to consider. 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.

1. 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.

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

Perks and Pitfalls: You will have full control over your brand and will likely be coming into the space with something new. 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. You’ll want to make sure you’re always thinking ahead about how you will scale and possibly grow your product line over time in order to stay competitive and offer your customer base something new.
Tasks to Get 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 would hiring a shipping service be worth saving 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.

• **Calculate how long your products take to make:** You should know exactly how long it takes to make a product. Also give some thought as to whether or not you will make items to order or if you want to keep inventory on hand. Be sure to document any labor costs, whether it’s money spent or time spent.

• **Consider where you’ll store your inventory:** Even if you’re lucky enough to have an empty room in your home, that probably won’t scale with your business. Look into alternatives like renting a space, opening a storefront or using 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.

2. Working with a Manufacturer or Wholesaler

Working with a manufacturer or wholesaler means you’re essentially hiring a partner to develop your product. This is a great option if you aren’t able to make a product yourself, or 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.

Perks and Pitfalls: 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.
Items to Consider:

- **Finding products:** This can be as simple as forming a business relationship with a friend who makes a product you’d like to sell, partnering with an existing company and taking their business online or from B2B to B2C, hiring a manufacturer, building relationships with makers on Instagram or using Etsy Wholesale. If you’re looking for a manufacturer to make your products, you can easily research options online. Finding the right partner can take some time, so don’t get discouraged.

- **Checking references:** As with any business, you need to make sure you’re dealing with someone who is legit. 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.

- **Evaluating 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 be? Take into consideration production, shipping and potential hidden fees.
  
  - How long will it take for them to make/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?

- **Getting a sample:** 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.
• **Picking one:** Weigh your options and get going! 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.

### 3. 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. 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 is also good for expanding the product catalog of an existing store.

**Perks and Pitfalls:** Dropshipping means you don’t need to deal with inventory, packaging or fulfilment. 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.

**Items to Consider:**

The steps to find a dropshipper 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 go

Please note that, as with anything, there are always fringe cases. Don’t get discouraged or give up on an idea just because it doesn’t fit into any of the above scenarios. These are intended to serve as a guide to help you begin research and bubble up your most profitable and realistic business ideas.
CHAPTER 8

How to Create and Launch a Profitable Online Store (Seriously)

Tracey Wallace
CHAPTER 8

How to Create and Launch a Profitable Online Store (Seriously)

If you’re just dropping in to this guide here, then we have a lot to cover!

First, this is one chapter in a 9-chapter guide on how to start a profitable online business. 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.

You may be wondering, then, why the actually launching of an online store is a chapter so late in the game for a guide on How to Start an Online Business.

The answer is simple: because planning is the key to long-term success.

And, planning isn’t hard. The first step is simply to get started. Here’s what we’ve covered in terms of planning up to this point to prepare smart entrepreneurs for the next step: actually going live!

- Decide what to sell: You have two choices here — commoditized or unique products. By and large online, unique products sell best. So, find yourself a product niche you are passionate about or one that is trending. Bonus points if you can manage to find both. Google Trends can help you spot trends. For passion, you’ll have to look deep within yourself. Reference Chapter 1 for a breakdown with examples of how other entrepreneurs found niche success.

- Make sure you can actually sell it: Beyond other people potentially wanting to buy what you are selling (which is another exercise almost entirely), it is important that you consider the challenges in your product niche before you move forward with launching a store. For instance, have you thought about your product’s weight and size? Sure, you might be able to sell your item for much less than the competition, but will shipping costs obliterate your margins? They will if your item is too big or heavy. Reference chapter 2 for more information.
• Get to know other people who are selling it (and already buying it): Online competition is fierce, and your best offense is a good defense. Or, rather, your best offense is knowing your competition thoroughly and differentiating yourself in the market. At this stage of the game, you’ll want to do some keyword research. Then, you’ll want to get a good understanding of your product market and the overall trends driving that market. Read chapter 3 for more information on how to do this effectively.

• Analyze what your closest competitors are doing: Now that you have a better feel for the lay of the land, use this competitive analysis template to get a top level view of your top 10 competitors in the space. Remember, there are three types of competitors: primary, secondary and tertiary. You want to have a good eye on each of them. Pinpoint strengths and weakness of each brand. Note where they are selling. All of this will help you to easily find the holes in the market. Those holes are yours to fill. Reference chapter 4 for more detail.

• Make sure you aren’t breaking any laws: Of course, before you begin anything, double check that your business is operating within the confines of the law where you’re selling — local, state, federal and even international, if applicable. This applies both before you launch (i.e. can you legally sell that?) and even after you launch (i.e. have you paid the proper taxes?). This can get complicated, and different states have different rules. Grab yourself some coffee and sit down for a legal lesson in online sales.

• Identify your market (and your differentiators): Now that you have your competitive analysis on lockdown, you can easily identify your target market. This will be the market that is interested in the product, but is currently underserved. You’ll use this targeting in determining your brand look and feel, tone and overall point of view. You want your brand to be the trustworthy confident of these underserved customers in a trending category. So, speak to them like you are.

• Source your product: And once you have all the background information figured out, it is time to source your product. Will you dropship, make the item in house or use a 3PL? The answer to this is different for every single brand, even within the same selling category. There are benefits and pitfalls to all of your options. Figure out which one works best for your margins, your sales channel and your customer’s expectations.
**Choose an ecommerce platform**

Now that you’ve done all the research, it’s time to choose your ecommerce platform, build your store, and launch your online brand.

The vast majority of new online stores today choose to go with a SaaS solution like BigCommerce. This is because there is a low cost to entry — no costly development or technical headaches — and 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.

Next, make sure you ask all the right questions before you commit.

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 checklist for each platform you consider:

- How simple is the platform to use? Do I feel comfortable using it?
- Does it offer reliable hosting? Will my site stay up even when I get a flood of traffic?
- Who is going to be there to support me when I have questions? Do I need to pay for support?
- Will the platform support the type of products I want to sell? If the product has variations, how does the platform display all of these options? How simple is that to manage?
- Is there a limit to how many products I can sell? Are there any transaction fees?
- Can I sell directly to customers on Facebook, eBay, Amazon, and Pinterest without managing separate inventories?
- How do I manage inventory?
- What options do I have to accept payments? Should I use PayPal or Stripe? How much do they cost?
- What options can I offer for shipping?
• What are my options for themes? How customizable are those themes?

• How will my store look on a mobile device? Can I customize the mobile experience?

• How do I show up for Google search results and improve my SEO?

• Does it offer integrations with additional applications so I can customize my business as it grows? Do I need to pay for any additional functionality I might need?

• Are there open APIs I can use to customize and automate my business grows so I won’t have to migrate to a new solution?

• What are the out-of-the-box UX features that will make it easier for customers to shop on my site (i.e. faceted search, HTTPS, etc.)? Do I have to pay for these features?

• How will this platform help me show up in search engines so potential customers can find my online store?

• What material is available to help me learn more about growing my online business?

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.

Below are some of the top concerns for new store owners when looking for an ecommerce platform.

**Cost**

Ecommerce platforms are not free. The services they offer combine the need for multiple technologies all in one: hosting, checkout, payments, PCI compliance, fraud, DDoS attacks, analytics and more. And, they organize all of this on the backend so it’s easy for you to access every point you need.

Their pricing models do differ, though, and it’s crucial that you research your options. Pay special attention to what is included at each price point.

For instance, the out-of-the-box functionality of BigCommerce can save businesses up to $300 – $5,000 annually in app subscription costs, compared to Shopify specifically.
How did we configure this?

On the low end, $300/year comes from the analysis of the top 30 apps offered by Shopify which BigCommerce natively includes 60%. Of those top 30 apps, the monthly subscription cost would be $26.94/month, or $323.28 annually.

Separate from this number, we commissioned a study where both BigCommerce and Shopify instances were set up in the effort of finding what apps were needed to add to Shopify to get to the same level of functionality found with BigCommerce out of the box. Per the analysis, the study found that there were $169-$424 in monthly subscription costs to achieve this, or $2,033-$5,093 annually*.

Clearly, what your business needs is unique to you. You may not need the same level of functionality our interns and employees found they would need. Do note though that most apps in an ecommerce platform’s marketplace come at an additional cost.

*All of this data is as of January 2017.

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.

As you are just starting up, it’s important to find a theme or template that best represents your brand. Also, you want one that is customizable enough for immediate differentiation at launch and for long-term growth overtime.

Most platforms have free and paid for 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.

Here’s how you would do this in BigCommerce.
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 also become a technologist. This means that the platform needs to be easy to navigate, setup 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?

Here's how BigCommerce walk you through it.
Welcome to your Control Panel! We’ve completed some key tasks to help you get started.

- **Your store looks beautiful**
  We’ve selected a theme to help you get started.

- **Accept credit cards and PayPal**
  Your customers can now check out using any major credit or debit card and PayPal.

**Here are some next steps to get your store up and running:**

- **Add products**
  Populate your store with products to sell.
  Add Products

- **We’ll get you all set to ship**
  You’ll be able to ship all over the United States with a flat rate per order.

- **Calculate tax automatically**
  Tax will be automatically calculated for your customers at the time of purchase.
  Calculate Tax Automatically

- **Review & test your store**
  Review your store to make sure it’s ready for launch. Other people can access your store to help you test using the preview code.
  Preview code: FF7A0DMM

Ready for more? Check out these helpful links to accelerate your business.

- How do I add products to my store?
- How do I import products using a CSV file?
- How do I create a downloadable product?
- How do I customize my store design?
**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. 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.
Centralized Channel Management
The current state of ecommerce in omnichannel. Customers shop everywhere and anywhere -- and it’s important that your product be there so you can win the sale. 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 over, manage price points, product descriptions and more without ever level the page.

Scalability & Customizability
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 in their infant stage aren’t quite to 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 in your brand’s growth and look for platforms with trusted and fast APIs.

Some platforms limit API calls at 2 requests/sec. On request, they might up this to 10 requests/sec. That’s fine for the short-term, but it doesn’t allow for real-time syncing of catalogs or immediate data pushes (so you can automate fulfillment at various warehouses, for instance).

BigCommerce’s API allows for 100’s of requests per second. To translate that, BigCommerce updating a 25,000 product catalog vs. other platforms updating that same catalog is roughly 60 seconds versus two hours. Four hours, even, if you are referring to the 2 requests/sec.

Think long-term here. Your future self won’t have that time.

**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.

Sure, you could whip a website together in a few hours, throw it up on the internet and just wait to see what happens. But I’m going to ruin the surprise and let you know you’ll only have a handful of visitors and an empty bank account to show for it.

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

You need to build a store that looks professional, attracts the right kind of customers and has the right calls to action once they arrive. These next three posts 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 drive online sales. But your design shouldn’t outshine what you are trying to sell.

Make your products the star of the show!

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 much "stuff" 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.

**Build your design on the right foundation**

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 also never get lost.

If you only have a handful of product categories, selecting a theme with menu navigation across the top will work great. However, if you have loads of products and categories, think about consolidating them as best you can (get feedback from friends and family if you need an outsider’s perspective) and choose from the templates that have 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 of the relevant and compelling parts of your site upon arrival.

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

See below how Eazy Wallz allows customers to self select their persona to drive them to a more targeted shopping experience.

Last, but certainly not least, make sure whatever design template you choose has a rock solid mobile version as well. You will 100% lose sales if you don’t provide your customers with a good mobile experience and streamlined checkout process.

Rather than quote stats, I want you to answer one simple question: how much distance is between you and your mobile device right now? Is it right beside you? Is it in your pocket or purse right beside you? Are you reading this blog post on your smartphone or tablet? Yeah, I thought so.
Get all the nuts and bolts in place
There are a few key pieces 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.

Step 1: Pick a payment gateway

If you want to get paid, this is a pretty important step!

Payment gateways are how you collect money from your customers. Your ecommerce platform can tell you what gateways work 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 need to get the full picture of how it works and how it will affect your bottom line. You also want to pick something that can grow with your business. So before you lock yourself in, ask the following questions about each payment solution:

- Are there set up 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?

Step 2: Set up shipping

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 trick is making sure all of these factors are working 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 straight forward**, this will prevent confusion or surprises, making it more likely the 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! According to a Forrester Research Study, high shipping costs are the number one reason for cart abandonment.

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 local pick-up as an option, you should. It’s often easier for everyone involved, plus the customer doesn’t have to pay any shipping costs.

On the back end, you 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 drafting up a procedure for what happens when an order come in.

Here are the questions you should answer around fulfillment:

1. How do you know you have an order?

2. How do you print the invoice? How do you print the packaging 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.

**Step 3: Tackle Taxes**

We’re talking about taxes for your business at this point, not local sales tax. So this step is pretty short and sweet — talk to 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. Trust me, you’ll save money and headaches in the long run by consulting a pro.

**Step 4: Select a Great Domain Name**

Picking a domain name is critical. It is your web address as well as your brand and an important marketing tool.

Your domain name will serve as 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.
It's pretty safe to say that no matter what, 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
- 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. Talk about efficient! Analytics in general are a key element in helping you act on facts rather than assumptions about your customers and business.

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 begin driving traffic.
CHAPTER 9

59 Productivity Hacks for Online Small Business Owners

Tracey Wallace
CHAPTER 9

59 Productivity Hacks for Online Small Business Owners

There are a lot of ecommerce resources that are publicly available. We’ve put together a quick hit list that will enable you to be more productive and stay up-to-date on your industry.

We’ve limited and categorized the list for easier handling. Our goal is not to overwhelm you, but rather give you a solid foundation on which to get started.

Productivity Tips for Business Owners

Everyone is looking to save time and money, and no one is more eager to increase productivity than those running their own businesses. Here are some simple, inexpensive tools to help.

- Get design help on the cheap: Need some simple graphic design help for a logo, PPC banner or social media ad? Check out Fiverr, where as little as $5 can go a long way. You can also use a service like 99designs for help with logo and site design. Depending on the complexity and quality you need, you can also search for a design agency.

- Streamline your bookkeeping: This is a huge pain point for many startup businesses. Although it pays to hire a professional as you grow, try QuickBooks and Xero when you’re starting out. Both integrate with one-click into BigCommerce.

- Schedule social media: Social media is a 24/7 gig. You should schedule your tweets and Facebook posts to make sure you’re regularly posting, plus test which times of day see the most engagement. Try for times not on the hour — like 9:13 a.m. or 1:47 p.m. Tools like Hootsuite and Buffer can provide a one-stop-shop for this type of work, maximizing your productivity.

- Improve your email marketing: Are you using your personal email for marketing? Stop! There are plenty of email marketing tools out there that will help you work smarter with pre-built templates, scheduling and list segmentation. Test out options like MailChimp, Constant Contact or Klaviyo.
• Schedule shipping pickups: At no extra charge (unless you want a time outside normal mail delivery hours), you can schedule your shipping provider to pick up a shipment rather than waiting in line at their offices. Check out options for FedEx, UPS and USPS.

• Manage your email inbox: Boomerang for Gmail schedules emails to automatically send based on criteria you set.

• Collaborate and manage projects: Trello is a great option for growing businesses struggling to manage it all. You get integrated file sharing, project management, workflow automation and centralized communication from any device. Also check out Slack or Pivotal Tracker as alternatives.

• Share resources: There are so many tools out there to help you share notes, ideas and even files. Try out Google Drive or Evernote as a start. For larger items like images and video, try Dropbox.

• Take care of yourself: Forgetting to take care of yourself is a common issue for entrepreneurs. A Fitbit or similar device will help you stay active, monitor your sleep and eat right. Try out a financial service like Mint to track what you’re spending. Use a virtual assistant like EasilyDo to help you stay on top of your schedule. Set up a few triggers on If This Then That to stay relevant on social networks without having to manually post. Finally, download an app like Coach.me that allows you set and track goals like increasing productivity, improving your health, etc.

**Keep Track of Great Content**

There’s a lot of information out there concerning small businesses and ecommerce, and it can be difficult to keep track of it all. Here are three tools to make sure you never miss a thing.

• Google Alerts: Get email notifications at whatever cadence you’d like any time Google finds new results on your industry, competition, related news and more.

• Feedly: Organize all the blogs and publications you like to read via a simple (and pretty) RSS feed.

• TweetDeck: This powerful tool lets you see what everyone on Twitter is saying about your industry, get involved in tweetchats (and perhaps run your own), follow experts in ecommerce and track your competitors.
Follow the Best Blogs

Staying on top of industry information, government regulations, ecommerce best practices and marketing trends is key to your success.

Don’t forget to subscribe to your competitors’ blogs to keep abreast of your industry, products and how the competition markets themselves. Also, don’t forget about the big guys like Inc, The Wall Street Journal and Entrepreneur.

Of course, there are countless great blogs out there to follow to help you sell more and educate you on the industry. There are so many in fact that it’s hard to tell which are the most helpful.

So, I went out to the ecommerce experts and influencers and asked them: what blogs and publications do you recommend? These are the people who were once in your exact shoes — and have since found multi-million dollar success.

Here is what they read to help them stay on top of their game.

Alex Birkett, Growth Marketing Manager, ConversionXL

I like Conductrics Blog and the Testing Discipline blog for tactical business info. You can tell they aren’t writing for BS reasons like social shares, and more to put good information out into the world.

I also like The Atlantic and FiveThirtyEight, though they aren’t business specific.

Jan Lastuvka, CEO & Co-Founder, MonkeyData

The Hubspot marketing blog is an absolute must for online entrepreneurs. These guys have been in the game a long time, have a ton of great content, and, very important for me, great visuals, which helps to illustrate the results of their recommendations. They also have a ton of other great resources that can help your business.

Everett Sizemore, Director of Marketing, Inflow

Aside from our own blog at Inflow, I recommend the Get Elastic ecommerce blog and Moz.
Jamie Turner, CEO, 60 Second Marketer

Right now, I’m a big fan of both The Hustle as well as Nate Silver’s FiveThirtyEight.com website. Both are knocking it out of the park right now. Bravo.

Ted Rubin, Social Marketing Strategist, Keynote Speaker, Brand Evangelist and Acting CMO Brand Innovators

Harvard Business Review for great insights. SethGodin.com has brilliant thought leadership.

Jason Dea, Director Product Marketing, Intelex

My favorite online resource for business information is actually Quora. Once you get the hang of navigating the site, it’s incredible the type of advice and the caliber of advisers you can find in that community. It’s a great example of how the internet has allowed us not just as entrepreneurs but people to connect in ways that were unheard of only a few years ago.

Andy Etemadi, CEO, EYEMAGINE

I get a lot of valuable information from LinkedIn Pulse and HubSpot’s sales and marketing blog. There is so much good content on almost every topic that a simple search will return the relevant information I’m looking for.

Taylor Sicard, VP of Growth, Rare.io

My favorite online business resource is Saastr. Every business needs to grow and SaaS (Software-as-a-service) businesses are turning growth into a science.

Understanding how to use those key metrics to grow a SaaS company is extremely beneficial for an online store as they have to deal with the same challenges (customers acquisitions, customer retention, monthly recurring revenue, etc).
Ruthie Berber, Co-Marketing Manager, Yotpo

Not to do a shameless plug, but the Yotpo blog is packed with original data, unique customer case studies, and tons of deep dive how to's. It's a super valuable resource for me when looking for the latest ecommerce tips, trends and benchmarks.

Adii Pienaar, Founder, Conversio

My suggestion here isn’t a must-read, as much as it’s a must-listen.

I have really enjoyed the ZenFounder podcast in the last year, because it uncovers some of the entrepreneurial challenges that aren’t spoken about as often. I see so much advice for entrepreneurs that focuses on tactics or things they need to do within their business, but it ultimately neglects one of the most important parts of any business: the founder or entrepreneur.

The podcast has definitely helped me be more aware of my own triggers for bad (business) behavior or to just be more aware of when I need to take a break for example (to avoid burnout). As a result, I’ve definitely learnt to take much better care of myself.

Jacob Firuta, Content Manager, LiveChat

I was always a fan of the content HubSpot produces. You always get a two-for-one deal with them. First, you can read up on all kind of topics, from email marketing to landing page creation. Second, you see the things they preach put into practice – either in their content or on their landing pages. Especially their reports are worth checking out!

Matt Gratt, Senior Marketing Manager – SEO, Content, Campaigns, BigCommerce

I love Kevin Hillstrom’s MineThatData blog. Rather than talk about a channel-centric model of online marketing, Kevin discusses a customer-centric model where people act and transact across channels.
Meni Morim, CEO and Co-founder, Findify

Without a shadow of a doubt, this blog. There are quite a lot of startup blogs out there, but nothing beats the Groove blog.

First of all, it’s honest, transparent, and humble. They share everything, from the huge wins, to the horrible losses. They take you with them on their journey, which is incredibly inspiring.

An absolute MUST READ for any online business.

Sanjay Arora, CEO & Founder, Nextopia Software Corporation

I am a huge fan of Practical Ecommerce, as it’s a well-rounded source of ecommerce news and covers everything from marketing and social media to practical tips and strategies to improve your ecommerce store. It’s a great resource for anyone working in the ecommerce industry as it publishes high-quality, informative content that can be applied to everyday business.

Grant Thomas, Digital Marketing Manager, Justuno

Ecommerce Influence has been my destination of late. Great for articles, podcasts and also have a members only community which gives you access to a bunch of free ecommerce marketing content.

Tracey Wallace, Editor-in-Chief, BigCommerce

I’d be remiss not to include myself, right? Naturally, I firmly believe the BigCommerce Blog has tons of great insights and actionable info to help you grow. But, insofar as what I’m reading everyday, I’m actually much more of a listener.

Here on the Podcasts topping my list:

- On Being: Krista Tippett navigates the spiritual world like a saint herself, and the caliber of people she speaks with will blow your mind. This isn’t business related, but often the best business ideas come from outside the business box. So, listen up!

- The Tim Ferriss Show: This choice is pretty cliche, but the man does speak with some of the best in the industry — and you get an inside look at how they live their lives to
be so insanely productive. It’s a good place to get a few tips and try a few things out (i.e. meditation, which Krista Tippett would also recommend!).

- Longform Podcast: This podcast talks with writers, interviews, editors and more about the process of storytelling and connecting with audiences. For any online marketer, it’s a must-listen. Customer loyalty is driven by engaging storytelling.

- 2x Ecommerce: This podcast is how I ever even found Kunle Campbell (who writes often for the BigCommerce blog). Here, he talks with leading ecommerce experts on how to grow an already successful business (about $1M or so in revenue) to $10M or more. It is definitely more for an already experienced audience, but it is aspirational for anyone just starting up.

And, when I do read, it is often a Medium post, like this one: Why People Buy Things.