



A website provides a shop window for any customers or potential customers to your business. Many firms utilize the benefits of selling online as well as selling in their own shop store to increase sales, as online stores can be very effective sales channels. Building an online shop is an important process as it is more than just simply listing your products/ services.

Firstly you need to establish your strategy, you'll need to make sure that every stage of a transaction is mapped out before pushing ahead; know the process of an order before you start. You'll need a good online payment provider/ payment gateway for your site e.g EPDQ's or a PayPal system. You can sort these out with a bank or use an established online payment system. Getting this right already increases the security of your site. You'll also need to think about the hosting company your website is sitting on, if you are to become a transactional site, can the server you're currently sitting on handle more visitors and a payment system?

After establishing a strategy, you can start to build your online shop. Remember your shop is for your customers and not your designer so keep them at the forefront of your mind. It is the opinion of the customer which determines the strengths and weakness of your website. Sell from the second your customer arrives, show them the products as soon as possible and make it as easy for them to find what they're looking for.

Tips for building your online shop:

- Make sure every product has it's own page
- Feature unique descriptions of each product you sell, think about your brand when writing these.
- Use professional looking images which also fit into the look of your brand.
- Make sure your products and images fit in with the brand, website's feel and target market
- Use a simple shopping cart system
- Make sure your website is fast (applicable to non transactional websites as well)
- Let your customers know who they are buying from, add contact information so customers can feel more secure

After building your store, make sure you get it right behind the scenes. How you handle your customer orders can impact on the customer's perception as they want an order as trouble-free as possible. Choose your distribution channels to get your goods to your customers e.g. downloads (if the product is software), or a postal service (for physical goods.) Fast safe delivery creates a good impression – as does a returns policy. Be secure in all your actions as it's important to protect against people hacking into your data, for both your safety and your customer's safety. Virus protection, firewalls and regular password changes must be considered as well as contingency measures such as a back up of the site.

Marketing your online outlet is just as important in your strategy. Having a great online market means nothing if no one knows about it. Features such as SEO, Pay-per click advertising, and social media can help your marketing. To help your customers you need to know what they search and what key phrases they use when looking for products. Online software's can help gather this information. Monitor what people are searching for on your website – you might find demand for your products you don't carry or find people commonly misspelling items. Find out what your customers think as well through reviews. User reviews will not only give you unique content but will help other people over the buying tipping point. Use your social media; are people complaining or praising on twitter, engage with them at a personal level to make them feel at ease. Also Facebook advertising is a good social media outlet and can help drive people to your site. Facebook adverts being a cost means your adverts will need to be handled with care to avoid wasting money, make sure your adverts are targeted at the right demographic and are being monitored to see if they are working. Make more than one advert and see which adverts to better than which.

Building trust is also key in your strategy. Buying online requires a lot of faith on the part of the buyer. Reassure your customers as much as possible, have clear terms and conditions, and a returns policy on your site. Be friendly with your customers and include a personal 'about us' page. Use SSL Encrypted pages to show how safely your site handles money and using a payment gateway from a bank gives your website integrity as customers will trust a known bank's name. Once your shop is up and running, remember your existing customers, amongst your new customers, as they are your best customers. Use promotions or special offers to encourage them to keep returning and maybe include loyalty schemes for them.