Creating an E-Commerce Website: The Basics

OVERVIEW

Making an online purchase requires just a few keystrokes, but creating an e-commerce site requires a bit more effort. It's an essential step for small business owners, particularly those in rural communities looking to reach more customers—and one Taos MainStreet helped several local business owners take as part of its Business Alive program in 2020. Informed by those learnings in Taos, this toolkit covers the basics every business owner needs to make the move online, from creating a website to selecting the right e-commerce platform, and marketing the new site.
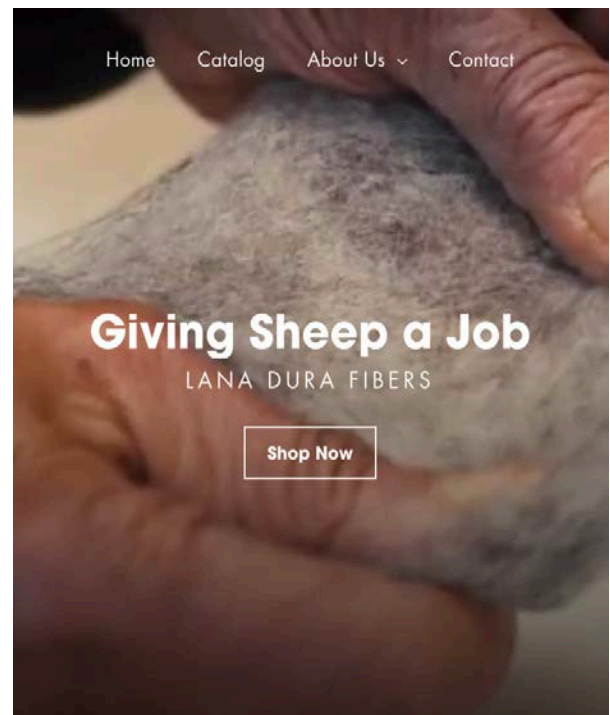
BEFORE YOU BEGIN

- **Set a goal for your website**. Are you trying to sell products? Are you looking for a way to let people make appointments or schedule service? Or do you simply want to make people aware of your brick-and-mortar shop? Determining the goal of your online presence will shape how you approach building and maintaining it.

- **Set a budget.** Costs can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand. If you build your own website, photograph your own inventory, and do your own marketing, you could operate a site for as little as the monthly fee to keep it live—commonly around $30. Keep in mind: If you opt for professional development, it will cost more but your final product will likely be sharper and have better functionality.

- **Determine how involved you want to be.** If you want to build and manage your own website and point-of-sale system (POS), there are content management systems (CMS) with simple templates from which you can start from scratch, and Shopify is among the most popular because it functions as both a CMS and point-of-sale system. However, you'll have to be somewhat tech savvy—or willing to learn—if you're going to do it yourself.

- **Think about your inventory.** If you have only a handful of products, moving each one online might be simple, and it may not be too expensive to have each of the products professionally photographed. If your inventory is large—several hundred or thousand products—you'll need to decide which products you want to move online first. Keep in mind, each piece of inventory needs a product description and will ultimately need unique tracking within your point-of-sale system, as well as a method to ship each product.

AN EXAMPLE FROM TAOS, NEW MEXICO

- **Minna White,** a felt maker outside of Taos, runs a small shop called Lana Dura. As part of the Business Alive program, White launched a new website and is now recording her first online sales. Browse her store: www.lanadura.com

CHOOSING THE BEST PLATFORM

PLATFORM	BEST FOR...	BECAUSE...	BUT BE AWARE...
Etsy, free to establish a shopfront, but you'll pay fees on transactions	Artists, hobbyists, and other creatives who are selling a small number of wares and aren't trying to scale up their sales significantly.	Etsy is one of the simplest ways to list and sell products online; the setup is quick and doesn't require any web-development skills. Plus, sellers gain immediate access to a customer base that's already inclined to buy handmade products and support independent makers.	With Etsy, you won't have a custom web domain and you'll have less functionality than if you establish a unique online store.
Shopify, starts at $29 per month	Businesses that are selling products (versus services).	While other point-of-sale platforms like Square and Shopkeep are popular and consistently highly rated, Shopify often ranks best for e-commerce because of its speed, security, and user-friendly interface.	As your online sales grow, Shopify transaction fees can add up.
Sesami (Shopify integration) and other scheduling apps: Prices vary but basic plans are free	Service-related businesses (like salons and auto shops) that need a website with the ability for customers to book appointments rather than buy products.	Sesami is highly rated among Shopify scheduling apps because it's intuitive and easy to use, both for the business owner and customer.	There are dozens of service and scheduling options both for Shopify and other CMS providers. You'll need to do additional research to determine which option is best for you.
Custom website that uses a content management system like Wordpress, Wix, Squarespace, etc.; plans range from $25 to $45 per month	Business owners whose priority is to publish content and grow their brands rather than focusing on e-commerce. Custom CMS sites like those powered by Wordpress emphasize blog-style pages and offer more templates.	Wordpress is the most popular CMS platform available, and it powers nearly 40 percent of all websites. Because of this, it has supreme functionality and many professional developers are equipped to build and maintain a Wordpress-hosted website.	Content can create brand awareness, but it won't convert to cash. So if you're even considering online sales in the future, look for a CMS that can integrate with e-commerce tools like Shopify Wordpress, Squarespace, Wix all do.

AFTER YOUR SITE GOES LIVE

- **Once your website is live**, you'll need to make sure you and your employees are comfortable using the content management system as well as the point-of-sale system.

- **Let people know** about your new site. Social media and email marketing are two of the most important ways to get your website in front of potential customers.

- **Not all small businesses** have robust email lists or Facebook and Instagram accounts. Some companies will likely need to invest some time and dollars to grow their audience, but just as with website development you must decide how much you're willing to spend.

HOW TO LAUNCH A MARKETING STRATEGY

- **Should you hire someone?** If you don't feel comfortable or just don't want to take on your own marketing, hiring an agency is an effective place to start—but it could be expensive. Like the cost of building a website, hiring someone to launch a marketing strategy could cost several hundred or several thousand dollars.

- **If you do it yourself**, a cheaper option might be to set up a Facebook or Instagram ad acount and budget a small amount—perhaps $100 monthly—to boost posts and create ads targeting potential customers in your geographic area. (LOR's Social Media Overview Toolkit can help you get started.)

- **You can also leverage ads** on social media to gather email addresses and begin email-marketing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **How to launch a Shopify store**
- **How to choose the right point-of-sale system**
- **How to track inventory on your website**
- **How to determine shipping rates**
- **How to add Shopify to an exiting website**
- **What other content management systems exist**
- **How to use social media to grow e-commerce**
- **How to create a Facebook ad**
- **How to use email marketing for small businesses**
- **How to build an email list from scratch**
- **How to integrate appointment booking on Shopify**
- **How to choose an appointment-booking app (without Shopify integration)**
- **LOR's Social Media Overview Guide**