

# Building Up Your Online Presence— Immediately!

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Businesses routinely face slow times due to seasonality, business cycles, weather, illness, and other causes. Even when businesses' brick-and-mortar operations are slow, online sales and advertising remain an option for many goods and services. Both business websites and social media are readily accessible to small businesses and can support remote sales.

Brick-and-mortar employees can generate online content, take remote orders, and prepare packages. This may help you keep more employees employed, at least part-time. Some of your employees may already have experience building websites, coordinating social media, or managing online ordering systems. Other employees may be great photographers or exceptional writers. These are all skills that can be utilized to create wonderful content for digital marketing.

This fact sheet provides general ideas and guidelines for selecting and launching online platforms for your business. It is neither legal advice nor a business consultation. Compare your options and, when considering specific services, read the fine print before purchasing.

The first step is to identify your platform or platforms. You may need to create or improve your social media presence. You may need a website, which will require greater financial and time investments. Alternatively, you may be able to sell on a third-party site.

## Social Media

Social media platforms can help you reach your customers without incurring the time and expense of building a website. If you do not have social media accounts, identify the platform most relevant to your customers. An ideal option is to ask them what social media platforms they prefer. You can also look online to see what platforms your competitors use to reach customers. Examples include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, among others. It may be more manageable to start with one or two platforms and expand if necessary. You can purchase programs like Hootsuite to preload content across multiple platforms, but you can likely handle one or two platforms by yourself or with your staff.

Be sure that your social media accounts prominently display your contact information. You want customers to be able to message, email, or call you easily if they have questions or want to purchase a product or service. Be as thorough as possible in completing your account profile. Social media is meant to link people together, so follow relevant groups in your community. Be sure to let your customers know you are on social media. Start by asking your friends and customers to follow your social media pages and invite their friends to do the same. Encourage your followers to engage with content by liking, commenting, and sharing your posts. Occasionally, host a drawing or other incentive for followers to share your posts.

Building a social media following requires that your business has a consistent online presence.

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Prepare a series of posts in advance, and continue to plan posts to ensure you do not run out of content. If you are working to build sales directly, your inventory is a great content driver. For example, you can post one or two items per day. Make sure customers know how to order the item or act on the information in your post. Provide web addresses, emails, or phone numbers if needed. Sometimes customers may comment to order a product for pickup and then pay in person. Some businesses ask customers to fill out online forms (e.g., Google Docs/Forms or Survey Monkey) for orders with various options.

Some platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, let customers shop from the social media site. There are fees associated with this service, but the social media company handles payment security and helps determine sales tax calculations.

## **Generating Phone and Email Orders Through Social Media**

It is easy for customers to click a link to purchase a product on social media or your business website, but not all businesses are ready for e-commerce. Customers wanting to support your business may be willing to email or call you to place an order. An example is a restaurant posting their menu or specials along with their phone number. Other businesses can also provide information about their goods and services and invite customers to call or email orders. Retail businesses may post detailed photos and descriptions. This option may be easier than setting up an online store, but it also requires a good deal of customer trust, especially if they need to pay with a credit card over the phone. Credit card information should not be emailed. The business should establish a clear protocol to accept phone orders, process payment, and destroy credit card information. It is essential to get phone numbers along with payment and shipping information.

## **Email and Text Campaigns**

While social media is very much a part of social life, not everyone has social media profiles. Emails and texts are also effective ways to reach customers. In fact, you have more control over your direct

contact lists with these methods. Social media algorithms and post timing mean that only some of your followers will see your social media posts. However, your email or text will be delivered to the intended recipients. The people who have provided you with their contact information have expressed a specific interest in your business and may have purchased from you in the past. If you maintain a spreadsheet with email addresses and send emails from your business email account, be sure to contact customers individually or use a blind copy feature so you do not inadvertently share customers' contact information and break their trust. Alternatively, you can use an email marketing service like Constant Contact or Mail Chimp, which will also track whether people actually open your message. Be aware of the time of day when sending texts, and avoid early morning or late-night messages.

While your social media posts should be regular and might occasionally be general, personal communications should be used intentionally. Each message should communicate a clear purpose and alert the customer to important information. Invite the recipient to check out your new offerings or follow you on social media. Let them know you will be closed for a special event or extenuating circumstances, and tell them exactly when you will reopen. Include a link to your website, online store, or social media page.

## **Business Website**

A business website is the most professional option and the best way to go if you want to have an online store. A dedicated website is also the most expensive and time-consuming option to build an online presence. You can expect to pay a website hosting company \$50 to \$500 annually, depending on the hosting company you use, the features you need, and the number of users you expect. A domain name costs about \$10 per year. A Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) certificate—the secure “https://” that people are looking for when they hit a website, especially to shop—costs at least \$10 and increases with heightened security levels. Other costs include premium design themes, plugins, and additional add-ons. A retail business may want online store features, and a service company may

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Figure 1. Entry display in a Texas general store. Your website should convey the same feeling as your brick-and-mortar business. Photo: Rebekka Dudensing

need an online scheduling system. You can easily spend more than \$300 for a basic site. You will also spend a good deal of personal or staff time developing your site and creating its content. Hosting companies' stock templates make basic web design relatively simple, and if you enjoy designing content, this may be a great option for you.

Alternatively, you can hire a professional to create your website. The economic slowdown and more people working from home may mean that you can ask around and find an experienced professional to work on your site quickly. Try to get more than one quote and understand what the designer plans to do and what they plan to charge. While you may be able to set up a payment plan or barter your services, you should expect to invest several thousand dollars for a professional, functional site.

Businesses and professional designers often spend weeks to months designing a website's look, feel, and content. This includes selecting a domain name. If this is all new, you might think about other options before investing in a domain name and a web hosting plan that ends up not being what you or your customers need. On the other hand, a slowdown could be a good time to start thinking through your web plan, designing your site, and perhaps launching. There is room to improve sites, but you want it to be consistent with your brand.

## Online Store

If you already have a website, you can add an online store in several ways. Check out your site design options to see what is included in your hosting package and already available to you. You may be able to add a products or services page and link to an external account, such as PayPal, without additional cost beyond your current web hosting fee. Similarly, your hosting company may have a reservation or service request template. You may need to purchase a premium plugin, particularly if you have more extensive needs. All-in-one solutions combine website and payment processing functions. For example, Square, which many small businesses use for payment processing, has a website option.

Keep in mind that your store will incur transaction costs, which can become a large expense for small businesses. Online fees can exceed fees for in-person transactions; 3 percent would not be uncommon. Consider transaction costs, monthly or annual fees, and upfront costs, as well as the terms of the contract and plugin's compatibility with your website. As with web hosting companies and designers, shop around for the payment option that best fits your needs.

You may not need to start by selling every product you have. You can identify your top sellers and make them available online. Then you can continue building your online catalog. Be sure to include good photos and descriptions of products. You will also want to manage orders promptly. Identify the most efficient shipping options for your products, and incorporate shipping costs into your payment processing, either in the price charged for the good or as a separate shipping cost. Make sure customers understand how shipping costs are handled. Also, be sure to collect and remit applicable sales taxes.

## Third-Party Online Stores

If you do not want to manage your own website or web store, you may find a third-party site where you can sell your goods. For example, handmade or vintage goods can be sold through Etsy. Additional third-party sites such as eBay may also be

an easy option for selling goods and services. You will set up an account with the third-party site and be charged a fee for listings or sales. These might be flat fees per item or a percent of value. Be sure to read the site's terms so you understand the fee structure as well as expectations about eligible products and services, shipping, and customer management.

## Photos and Content

Good photos are essential to an online presence, regardless of your platform. Fortunately, expensive cameras are no longer needed. Smartphones make taking and editing pictures very easy. Make sure your photos are clear and have good lighting. Fuzzy or dark photos are not helpful and make you look less professional. Elaborate backgrounds and editing are not needed. Make sure customers can clearly see the color, form, and size of objects. Multiple photos from various angles are often helpful.

While a picture is worth a thousand words, every business needs words. Make sure people under-



Figure 2. Interior of a ladies' and children's boutique in East Texas. Clear online photos are as important as clean, attractive displays in your physical store. *Photo: Rebekka Dudensing*

stand what your business does, when it is open, and how to contact you. Be sure that products or services are appropriately described so customers understand what they can expect. Similarly, prices should be clearly labeled. If appropriate, include food, feed, and personal care product ingredients, either in text or in a clear photo.

## Getting the Word Out

Whether you build a new website, use a third-party retailer, or create or enhance your social media presence, customers need to know where to find you. Social media is an easy way to advertise to people online. Enlist your friends and existing customers in helping to get the word out. You can pay to boost posts, and it may sometimes be worthwhile to do so. You can also pay for search engine optimization to help customers find your business and for online advertisements. You can reach customers offline through signs, flyers, or traditional media—these can be useful tools to help customers know about your online presence as well.

You should also check your business's listings on Google, your local Chamber of Commerce, and other professional sites. Make sure your business's location, hours, and contact information are correct. These websites help potential customers find your business.

## Conclusion

Whichever online option you choose to promote your business, be sure to follow through with due diligence just as you would with traditional means of advertising and sales. Online platforms can be advantageous in promoting sales and business continuity during an economic slowdown and can continue to boost sales during better economic times.

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