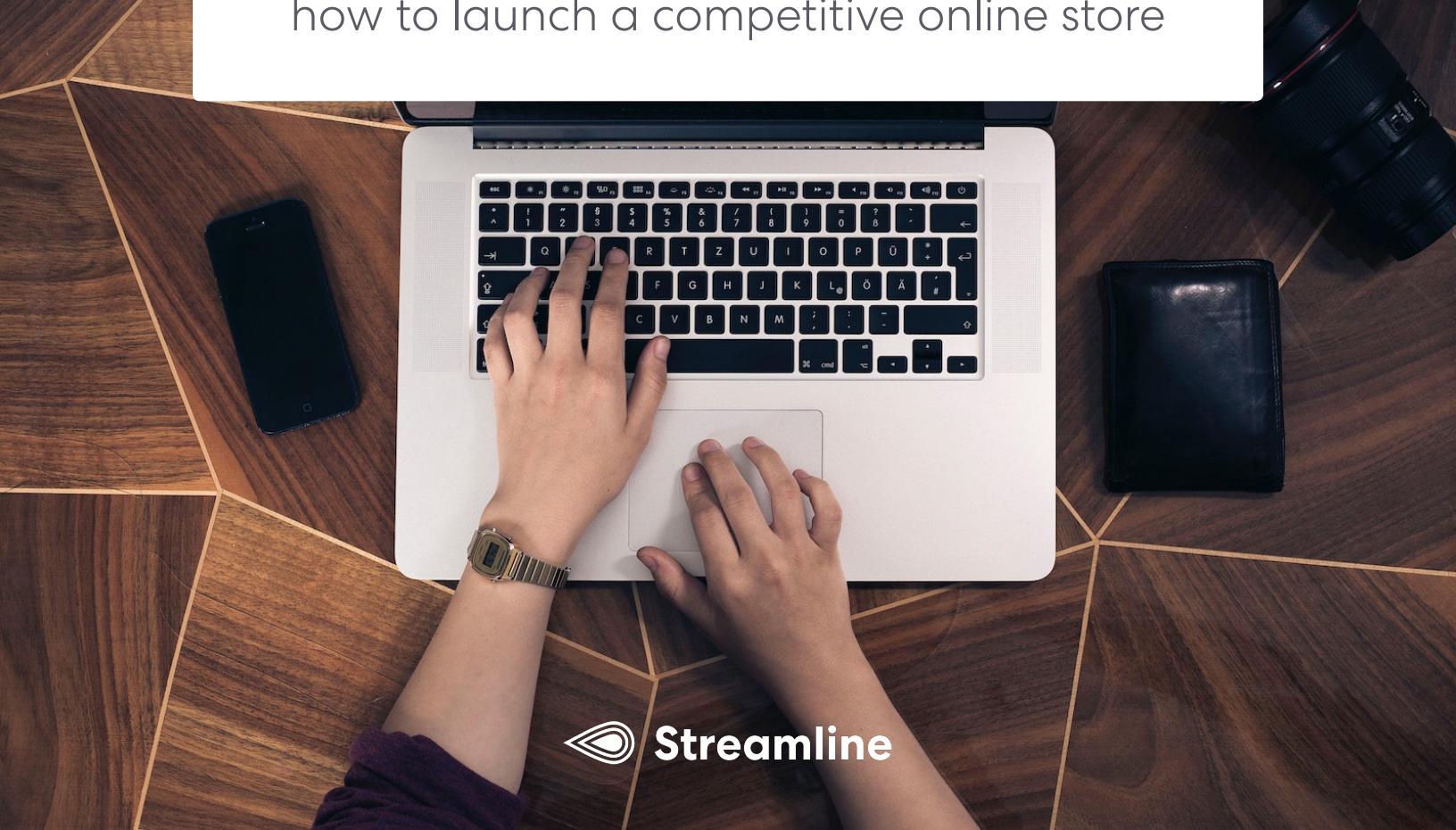




From Storefront to Ecommerce

The guide that teaches modern retailers
how to launch a competitive online store



Streamline

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WHAT EVERY BRICK & MORTAR RETAILER NEEDS TO KNOW

WHEN LOOKING AT ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS

Today 8 in 10 Americans do some kind of shopping online, and a big chunk of that is happening on mobile devices.

Nobody is debating whether eCommerce is important to the health and future of retail. That's been decided.

We know you're not here today to decide if eCommerce is right for your business or not, you know it's important.

But you may be reading this ebook because the concept of launching an online store is extremely overwhelming to you.

That's completely understandable.

You may be concerned about things like is it going to cost me a fortune to build a site? How do I get this new channel to fit with our current processes at the store? Will I have to hire more people? Will I even sell anything since I neither have the experience in selling online or the time to learn?

Please understand that by the end of this book, we will have addressed all of those concerns for you and probably others that are looming in the back of your mind.

Here is some good news for you: eCommerce is such a ubiquitous part of retail, that the barrier to getting your store online has gotten lower and lower over the last 5 years.

If cost is a major factor for you, know that any small to medium sized business can get a store launched for less than \$100/month on a Software as a Service (SaaS) platform like Shopify or BigCommerce. That's if your team is willing to do the legwork.

Many of these platforms also have created built-in integrations with other channels like Facebook, Instagram, point of sales, and others that allow you to



offer a seamless omnichannel experience for your customers right out of the box – which is becoming the expectation from serious brands.

The tools at your disposal are more sophisticated and more accessible than ever to retail businesses looking to get online, so be encouraged that you're coming into this at just the right time.

Now, on the flip side, because we are in a thriving era of eCommerce, the competition is higher and the expectations are higher. Gone are the days where you can simply get your products online and expect dividends.

Next generation retailers have to be able to keep up with how the industry and the consumer are changing. So let's look at the most important three things you need to know as you venture into eCommerce.

Your Story Matters

More than ever, today's younger generations of consumers are willing to compromise on price if it means buying better quality products or buying from a business that they can relate to, that is highly ethical, or if they know they are helping to support a good cause.

This means that you need to refine what your story is so that it shines through when people come to your site. What makes your products unique? Is it where you source them? Are you offering styles that are difficult to find elsewhere? Do

your products perform better than your competitors? What kind of lifestyle are you helping your customers connect with? Your value proposition is something you need to be able to define and communicate succinctly. It needs to permeate every piece of your business from your website, to the experience a customer has when bringing your product to their home.

Omnichannel Marketing

I touched on this concept a bit earlier, but it's worth diving into a little more. Omni-channel (or multi-channel) marketing means that your customers can engage with your business on multiple fronts AND that their shopping experience can extend beyond just one single channel.

Instead of only being able to shop and buy from your website or your brick-and-mortar store, the expectation is that they could browse what you have available on your site and then come into your store to try it out.

They may start out by interacting with your brand and asking questions on Facebook Messenger and then move to your website to finalize their purchase. Instagram may be the first time they come across your products and that leads them to your store to buy in person.

You have to know where to reach your customers and make the transition between all of those channels work as one unified experience.

The expectation is that they could browse what you have available on your site and then come into your store to try it out.

Again, the good news here is that today's software is adapting to this and makes it possible for you to have this level of integration through inexpensive apps and third party solutions.

But this is something you have to be proactive about. Setting up Facebook Messenger and connecting it to your online store is only the first step.

The next step is making sure you are available and helpful when customers start contacting you, and that you have a strategy for pointing them toward the sale – just as you would for your brick and mortar store.

It's also very important that your inventory is synced between in-store and online, so that customers can feel confident that the product they just settled on when looking at your site will be available to pick up if they came by your store.

Your Customer Service Must Stand Out

Easily the biggest challenge for consumers with shopping online is the potential risk of having a bad experience – a common hang up is if the product they order doesn't fit or meet their expectations.

Are they able to easily and quickly return it or will it be a pain in the butt and end up costing them more money? If they sense they may have a bad experience with you, they will very likely look elsewhere.

Brands like Amazon and Walmart have scaled to a level that they can make every single step of the process as convenient and painless as possible – free 2-day shipping, free returns/exchanges, robust customer reviews for every product.

They are constantly optimizing the customer experience.

You can't compete at their level, but you can still do enough to provide a positive experience for your customers. That coupled with your unique story and omni-channel capabilities will pay off.

If customers sense that they may have a bad experience with you, they will very likely look elsewhere.

So be thinking about what parts of your process you could make more personable and easy-going on the customer – whether that's a dead-simple returns/exchange policy, a personalized insert included in your packaging, or even just striving to provide really friendly and helpful customer service at all stages of the buying process.

These are the small details that make all the difference for growing your customer base.

There you have it. Those are the three things that you need to be thinking about as you venture into eCommerce. Let me be clear, you don't have to perfect these three things right off the bat. It will take some time to evolve your store so that it does these three things really well, but they have to be on your radar to improve from day 1.

Alright, so you're serious about launching your store and ready to start exploring your options. There are several pitfalls that will ultimately waste a lot of your budget if you're not careful to avoid them. We'll talk in detail about each in the next chapter.

MOST EXPENSIVE MISTAKES WHEN SETTING UP YOUR ONLINE STORE

As you begin the process of building your online store, know that there are some common mistakes that retailers often make, which end up being very costly.

Nobody has an infinite budget to launch a website, and you certainly don't want to be wasting money that could be used for phase 2 optimizations down the road.

So here are 3 pitfalls you need to be aware of and avoid when venturing into eCommerce.

Spending Too Much On Design and Customization

We see a lot of business owners who come in with the mindset that in order to build an online store, they have to be ready to spend \$30,000-\$50,000 to develop the site.

That kind of budget is certainly not out of the question for businesses that are expecting several million in revenue each year. They often come to a project like this with a higher level of needs.

But it's very different for businesses that are getting into eCommerce for the first time and are able to ramp up that channel more gradually over the first six months to a year.

Thanks to the rise of software as a service eCommerce platforms (like Shopify, BigCommerce, and Lightspeed eCom), building your site should not cost you an arm and a leg.

So how do you make sure you end up with a professional, high-end online store without blowing your budget? Here are a couple of our tips.

- **Lean on SaaS platforms, pre-designed themes and apps to build version 1 of your site.** This will still require you to work with eCommerce professionals to help you decide the right tools for your business and to properly set up, configure and customize everything for your brand. But

it's still a huge difference in cost compared to if you were to approach an agency asking for a custom store or custom development to extend functionality.

- **Know your budget from the start and be upfront about it with the agencies you talk with.** This will be very helpful for you to know what you can afford, especially as you start talking to developers and looking at the cost of different apps.

Now, you may be thinking, "Uh yeah, I have no budget for this". We get that. Very rarely do retailers have a pile of cash in the bank that's not already designated for POs or financing. But that doesn't mean you have to put this off until you do.

Think through what a reasonable bump in revenue would be if you were able to offer your products online and reach consumers from all over the country? It's not at all unreasonable or overly ambitious to expect that your online store can break even on the cost to develop it by the first 3-6 months. Some retailers break even just in the first 1-2 months. It just depends on what kind of following you have right now through local awareness and digital marketing channels like Facebook, Instagram and email.

Not Choosing a Platform That Integrates With Your Point of Sale and Inventory Management Solutions

This can cause a wide range of problems, the biggest of which being that you have to manage your inventory in two separate places, doubling your team's workload.

If you're not staying on top of this every day, then it's likely that a customer could buy something that shows as "in-stock", but someone had already bought the last remaining inventory at your store the day before.

The ideal scenario is that you're working on a solution where your inventory is synced automatically between your online store and your point of sale. There are several reliable options for this depending on the platforms you use.

The ideal scenario is that you're working on a solution where your inventory is synced automatically between your online store and your point of sale.

We are happy to work with you to find the best solution for your needs and

make sure you have a seamless inventory process that doesn't create more work and headaches.

Constantly Putting an Online Store on the Backburner

There is a lost opportunity cost here. Think about the figures you had in your head when estimating the earning potential of your online store

The longer you put off getting online and opening yourself up to new markets, the more revenue you're missing out on.

Also, if you're working with an agency, putting things off can often lead to rushed projects that raise the cost significantly because you've waited until last minute before you really need it, like with the holiday season approaching.

There's actually one more mistake that you can make, that if not thought through carefully during the decision making process can cost you thousands of dollars:

That is choosing an ecommerce platform. We'll get into that in-depth in the next chapter.

ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS

THE TOP OPTIONS AND HOW TO DECIDE

Now we want to talk about what eCommerce platforms you should consider for your online store. This can be an overwhelming decision for store owners, so our aim here is to simplify your options and explain the advantages and disadvantages of each.

There are literally hundreds of eCommerce platforms on the market - but we rarely, if ever, recommend outside of these 5:

Magento, Shopify, Lightspeed eCom, BigCommerce, and WooCommerce.

The reason for that is because these 5 platforms will meet the needs of most independent retailers and they have the most stability in terms of adoption and support. You can feel very confident that these platforms will be around for a while and stay on the forefront of eCommerce trends.

Let's look at the advantages and disadvantages of each.

Magento

Magento is one of the most scalable platforms for retailers with more intricate needs and high order volume (as in they are fulfilling hundreds of orders per day).

Because it is built on open-source software, any developer can extend and customize every piece of the software – from the home page design, to how many variants a product can have, to how much traffic and order volume the site can handle without crashing.

Magento also has been a major player for a long time, so there is a level of stability and maturity that a lot of platforms can't claim. The community of service providers and developers is huge, which would give you plenty of options when looking for a partner to help you build and run your online store.

HOWEVER, with great power, comes great complexity. Magento is not a platform you can just set up and launch without the help of professional designers and developers. Because of this, Magento likely will cost you quite a bit more to build on the front-end.

You will also need to budget several hundred to several thousand dollars a month to host the server, keep the site maintained and secure, and make sure it is optimized to handle customer activity. You essentially are getting yourself into the IT business, and if that's not your team's skill set, then you will need to contract out a partner to help.

This is why we reserve our recommendations of Magento for when the retailer expects high order volume or requires a certain level of extendability from the out-of-the-box features that are standard with some of the SaaS platforms like Lightspeed eCom, Shopify and BigCommerce.

Shopify

Speaking of SaaS (or Software as a Service), Shopify is one of the most popular and fastest growing options in the world – and for good reason. Of all the platforms that we'll cover in this chapter, Shopify is the leader in terms of getting online quickly with a beautiful looking site that will scale and flex to fit your needs as you grow.

The biggest advantages that Shopify has are:

- Their theme store, which has a highly vetted library of both free and paid themes (averaging around \$120 as a one-time purchase fee).
- Their app marketplace, which gives store owners the ability to leverage the work of other fantastic app developers to add more functionality to their site and integrate with other solutions (like marketing tools and point of sale software).
- Because Shopify has become such a popular platform, other software solutions like MailChimp, Salesforce, ShipStation, and even WordPress have made sure that you can easily integrate their tools with Shopify. This means that you are not stuck in a limited ecosystem when piecing together the different systems that your business relies on.
- Managed hosting: as is the case for most SaaS platforms, all Shopify stores are hosted for you by Shopify, who has an incredible track record at minimizing downtime (even during Black Friday). This means that you don't have to worry about your site going down or not being able to handle your customer traffic. Shopify has that all covered for you as a

part of the monthly subscription.

- This last advantage is more of an observation that I've had working in eCommerce over the last several years. Shopify tends to be ahead of the curve when it comes to adopting the latest eCommerce strategies and best practices for reaching today's consumers. They were one of the first to add integrations with the Facebook Pixel and Messenger directly into their platforms and their attention to providing one of the smoothest checkout experiences was way ahead of their competitors. Again, this is not to say that you can't now get these features with other options, but Shopify does tend to be quicker to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape of commerce. For now at least.

Now, before you run off and go sign up for Shopify, it does have some drawbacks that may mean it won't work for your business.

- Variation limit - This is one of the most common hangups that retailers often run into with Shopify. Each product can have a maximum of three options, for example size, color, and style and up to 100 total variants. Let's say you sell jeans, your options would likely be color, waist size and length. So with your Slim Fit Denim Jeans you may offer 4 colors, 20 different waist size/length combinations ($4 \times 20 = 80$ variants), which would keep you within Shopify's limit of 100. Depending on your product and the required options that you offer, you may run into issues with that limitation. BUT, in some cases, there are workarounds using different apps and custom line item properties that would make it work for you.
- Transaction fees - It should come as no surprise that Shopify is in the money-making business. In addition to selling their eCommerce platform, they also offer their own payment gateway, which is the method for collecting payments securely on your site. If you choose not to use their payment gateway, which does end up being the case for many retailers who are already tied to a particular provider for in-store, then with every transaction on your online store, you are hit with a transaction fee of 2%, 1% or 0.5%, depending which plan you are signed up for. That's NOT including credit card fees, which usually amount to around 3% of the total payment.

If you're doing a volume of several hundred thousand a year, those fees add up to thousands of dollars. Of course, for many people the benefits that Shopify offers more than make up for that added cost, but it's something to be mindful of before you get in too deep with them. It's also worth noting that Shopify does offer a plan called Shopify Plus for merchants that are at a certain scale, which does not include any transaction fees. So it's good to know that you won't always be on the

hook for that small percentage when you've substantially grown your online store.

- Point of Sale - Shopify does offer its own Point of Sale system that integrates completely with their online shopping cart; however, at this time, Shopify POS still lacks the inventory control and reporting features that most brick-and-mortar retailers need to understand their business. This means that you will need to find a third party point of sale solution that can sync inventory automatically between in-store and Shopify. There are definitely some options out there (ones that we recommend and help set up all the time).

Lightspeed is one of our favorite point of sale software, which requires a connector called Accumula to sync inventory and product details with Shopify. You could also look at running all of your inventory control through order management software like Stitch Labs. Either way, this does add some more cost to getting online.

WooCommerce

WooCommerce is the top eCommerce plugin for businesses who want to use the WordPress CMS for their website. Like Magento, it is an open-source platform, which means that it comes with a lot of flexibility as well as added costs to host and maintain the site as you scale. If the site is not performing well or the server goes down, you (or your IT company) is on the hook to get it fixed.

I love WordPress. As a content management system, it is the world-leader in how many businesses and individuals are using it and in the developer community that contributes to making it better. WooCommerce benefits greatly from that community, and with it, many businesses are able to build beautiful and very robust online stores.

However, for brick and mortar retailers, WooCommerce just simply does not yet have the same quality of integrations for the more robust point of sale tools, like Lightspeed, Vend, and Springboard. They are starting to catch up in that respect but are not there yet.

If you are set on using a simple point of sale system like Square, then WooCommerce is definitely an option you should consider, purely for the flexibility that it offers and to get the added benefits of being on WordPress.

Lightspeed eCom

As I've mentioned already, one of the best point of sale solutions for independent retailers is Lightspeed. Back in 2015, Lightspeed saw the writing on the wall with the rise of eCommerce and SMB-friendly solutions like Shopify on

the rise and acquired SEO Shop, which was a very well-known and widely used eCommerce platform. This was so that they could offer their own eCommerce solution that could fully integrate with their point of sale, fulfilling a massive need for brick and mortar retailers.

Lightspeed eCom is the youngest platform of the big five that we're covering in this chapter, but you wouldn't know it just from looking through the features.

Let's start with the disadvantages:

- Because it's quite new to the game, eCom is not as widely adopted as its competitors. So resources like the app marketplace, 3rd party integrations and pre-designed store themes, as well as the developer community experienced with eCom, are much more limited than what you would find on Shopify. This is really only a disadvantage of the short-term. Lightspeed has made it very clear that they are investing a lot of resources in making eCom a robust tool that can compete with the top players in the market.
- If utilizing a blog for content marketing is a big priority for you, then it's important that you know that Lightspeed eCom has a long way to go before it can be mentioned in the same breath as a CMS like WordPress. Typically, if we have a client that wants to leverage a blog for increasing traffic and sales, we recommend using WordPress and setting that as a subdomain of their main site (e.g. store.yoursite.com). With some front-end design work, you can create consistent look and navigation so that it never feels like they are hopping back and forth between two sites.
- Lastly, when using a pre-built theme to design your store, if you make any customizations to the theme code, you are voiding any future support and updates to that theme. Adding custom CSS is an exception here.

Now having said that, it has been our experience so far that the developers and agencies that created the themes are more than willing to still work with you to answer questions and help troubleshoot issues. Lightspeed's support are also very gracious and willing to help look at any issues, even related to the theme. So you're not completely up a creek if something goes wrong, but it does introduce some uncertainty.

You would want to make sure you have a Lightspeed eCom expert that you can call in case of any emergencies.

Now, here are the main reasons you should consider Lightspeed eCom:

- The single biggest advantage that Lightspeed eCom has over every other platform is that it completely integrates with their point of sale, Lightspeed Retail. So if that ends up being the tool you use for your stores, then Lightspeed eCom would be a great fit for your online store.

Now if you're sitting there thinking, "Man, I was really leaning toward Shopify, but we are using Lightspeed for our point of sale. Do I really have to go with eCom?"

The answer is no, you can make Lightspeed and Shopify work together. The best way to do that is using the connector Accumula, which will sync your inventory between in-store and Shopify.

Having said that, you really should give Lightspeed eCom some consideration because of how complete the integration with the point of sale is.

- Like Shopify, Lightspeed eCom is a managed solution. So hosting and support are part of the monthly cost to run your online store. This may seem like it's not that big of a deal, especially if you're used to hosting a site yourself.

But we can't stress enough how big of a benefit this is for independent retailers. When you reach a certain level of traffic and volume, hosting and managing your site becomes a full-time task. Lightspeed eCom will handle that all for you, likely at a fraction of the cost of you hiring that out yourself.

BigCommerce

BigCommerce is most comparable to Shopify, since it is also a SaaS platform that you pay monthly for access to their tools and apps. Now, we've already touted Shopify as one of the best in the SaaS market, so in what cases would you choose BigCommerce over Shopify?

- BigCommerce is adamant about being the best solution for mid-market retail businesses that are bringing in 3M-20M in annual sales. That doesn't mean they won't work well for small businesses, but the mid-market companies will notice the advantages of their platforms ability to scale at higher volumes and a more affordable pricing model.
- Along those same lines, BigCommerce does not charge a transaction fee. So if you're not at a high enough volume to be on the Shopify Plus plan, the savings there may be enough to justify going with BigCommerce.

- If you're turned off by the added costs of apps or plugins to implement certain marketing features or connect to third party tools, BigCommerce may be a breath of fresh air. Their plans offer some important features right out of the box like faceted search and filters, abandoned cart emails, product reviews, and customer groups and segments. The faceted search and filters is a big one for most retailers. It's not impossible to offer that feature with other platforms, but it will require an app or custom development.
- And lastly, if you're using a point of sale like ShopKeep, BigCommerce is the only built-in shopping cart integration that they currently support.

It's also worth mentioning that in terms of the features that make Shopify so attractive, like discounts on shipping rates, an optimized checkout experience, beautiful themes, a mature marketplace of apps, and integrations with modern marketing tools and other sales channels like Amazon, BigCommerce is right there with them. So it really is not a big step down in that aspect.

If you're trying to decide between the two, we recommend looking first at your point of sale and inventory control needs and seeing if Shopify or BigCommerce is an obvious winner.

If not, then do the math on what it will cost you to run your store over the first year. Look at the pricing structure for each plus any added costs from transaction fees and apps that you can expect.

If one platform is significantly less, then you should feel confident with choosing that. If they are pretty even, then just go with your gut. Try both out using their free trials and see if one wins out.

So there you have it! Hopefully that helps you simplify your decision and not make it more complicated.

It is worth mentioning that we do offer a roadmapping service where we work one on one with you to determine what eCommerce platform will be the best long-term fit for your store. This is often really helpful for the retailers we work with, because we know what to look for and the right questions to ask to determine what's going to be the ideal solution for you.

The big benefit that has for you is it takes away the risk that you get spend a lot of money to build your online store, only to quickly find out that it's not going to work, and you either have to start over or migrate to a new platform a year later.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN TERMS OF FULFILMENT PROCESS AND TIME COMMITMENT

One of the biggest hesitations for independent retailers when it comes to taking the plunge into ecommerce is introducing new processes for their already swamped staff.

Running a brick and mortar store and an online store are two very different endeavors because of the processes that come with each.

With brick and mortar, you have inventory control, purchase orders, store layout and design, point of sale tech and hardware, and staffing.

When you move into selling online, you're adding on top of all that: shipping workflows, negotiating carrier rates, label printing, packaging, online returns/exchanges, and another sales channel to manage inventory for. And that's just for order fulfilment, which doesn't include optimization to the website, marketing, etc.

It's understandable why retailers have a hard time making this transition. They are already so busy with the processes for their physical stores.

Even though it is a lot of work to make the leap, we encourage you to still press through. Ecommerce really is the present and future of retail, so even a small step forward is good.

In this chapter, we are going to cover some of the most common questions around order fulfillment, shipping workflows and tools, and time commitment expectations for your staff.

What can I expect with the basics of shipping physical goods?

When an order is placed online, the fulfilment process breaks down into a few steps.

- **Capture payment** - this is often done automatically by your payment gateway, but sometimes you may want to manually capture payment if it's important that you check each order for accuracy or are handing

inventory manually and need to make sure the item is in stock.

- **Print shipping label** - You will print the shipping label from three likely options: 1) directly from the order screen on your ecommerce platform's admin 2) from your chosen shipping carrier's site (e.g. UPS, FedEx) or 3) from order fulfilment software like ShipStation, Shippo, EasyPost and the many like them.
- **Package the order** - If you're shipping products directly from your store, this is where you will need a dedicated staff member and (at minimum) a modest fulfilment area in the back of your store where boxes, tape, a label printer and other packaging materials are easily accessible.

If you're shipping from a warehouse or are dropshipping the products, then you will arrange a workflow with them ahead of time. Often this involves including them on the notification emails that come in when orders are placed or sending a spreadsheet of any new orders once or twice per day.

- **Shipping the order** - This all depends on who your shipping carrier is (USPS comes every day, but FedEx/UPS will need to be notified if a package needs to be picked up). Depending on the volume of orders you are getting, you may even drop packages off at a carrier location on your way home from work. Or if you are getting daily orders, you can arrange regular pickup times with your chosen carrier. This can be in flux as you are settling in to the best workflow for your staff.
- **Notifying the customer** - Now you will need to let your customer know that the order is on its way. This is just good customer service and helps avoid any impatience from the customer because not knowing the status. Most likely, your ecommerce software will have notification emails that are set to go out when you mark an order as 'Shipped'. But if not, you will need to look at order fulfilment software like ShipStation to handle that for you.

What kind of time commitment will this be for my staff?

This all depends on how many orders you are getting. Now that you have a pretty good idea of the different steps to fulfilling an order, you can start to get a sense for how much time this will take each day.

We recommend that you designate a certain time of day in the late afternoon to take care of orders. Give enough time for new orders to come in and be included in that day's shipment, but also give enough time for your staff to process the orders before your carrier's deadline.

For example, if you're using FedEx, and the latest they will come by to pick up packages is 6:00pm, then around 4:00pm is an ideal time to start the process, as that leaves plenty of room to get orders out and deal with any technical issues that come up (and they will come up!).

What is the best shipping workflow if most of my inventory is in a warehouse?

If you are shipping from a warehouse, either as the sole location or in addition to your stores, then you need to arrange with the warehouse staff what the most efficient way is to notify them of new orders.

As I mentioned in the first question, this can be done by including them on the notification emails that go out when a new order is placed or you may use a spreadsheet that can be manually sent over that includes that day's orders and customer info.

This should all be worked out in advance of launching your online store. You definitely don't want to be troubleshooting that process as orders are coming in!

How do I handle returns and exchanges?

This can vary widely, depending on what ecommerce platform you are using, and what your store policies are on returns.

Before launching, make yourself familiar with how your software processes returns from customers, by Googling it. Yes, all the platforms that we mentioned in this book have documentation that explains how a customer can submit a return and how you can process it. Read up on that as soon as you know which platform you're going to be on.

You, of course, have the power to put whatever return policy you want for your store. Just remember that risk aversion is one of the biggest enemies of ecommerce, and having a generous, worry-free return/exchange policy is one of the best ways to combat that.

Do yourself a favor and figure out the math ahead of time. Worst case scenario: 40% of your online customers return their order (I did say worst case). Can you afford to cover shipping for them on the return or do they need to be responsible for it?

The best way to determine that pre-launch is to look at your profit margin. If it's healthy enough to handle the loss on shipping from occasional returns, then offering free returns will do wonders for your conversion rate (how often people buy).

But this should always be re-evaluated to make sure you are profitable enough

to keep the site afloat.

What if all my products are very different sizes and weight?

Limiting package sizes to be as flat and small as humanly possible is so so important to succeeding in ecommerce. So ahead of launching you will need to determine:

- What is the biggest sized item you would be shipping?
- What's the average size?
- What's the smallest size?

This will inform what your short-term shipping packages that you'll need to have on hand. I say short-term, because once you have some sales history for your online store, you will begin to see the trends of what items are purchased most often, what items are most often purchased together, etc. This will then give you a more accurate depiction of how to optimize package sizes.

It may be worth considering limiting the products you launch with and introducing some of the larger items as you get more comfortable with your shipping processes.

What kind of tools will I need to buy for shipping orders?

At the very least, you will need a label printer, a dedicated computer for printing the shipping labels, and some packaging tape.

You may also need a barcode scanner that will update inventory on the products that are going out.

To go a step further, we recommend that you consider order fulfilment software such as ShipStation to process orders. This would be especially important if you are shipping from multiple locations (e.g. your store and your warehouse) or if you are selling from multiple channels online (e.g. Amazon, your online store, eBay, etc.), as this software will consolidate all of those orders into one list that you can process all at once.

What are “third-party calculated shipping rates” and how do I get the best deals?

Third party calculated shipping rates are the rates you get from your chosen carrier(s) like UPS, FedEx, and USPS. When you set up a merchant account with these companies, you have the opportunity to negotiate those rates (which are often discounted for companies).

How low of a rate you get depends entirely on the volume of orders that you have going out. A business that is shipping 50 orders per day will get a much better rate than one shipping 5 orders per day.

Some ecommerce platforms have arrangements with the top carriers to offer discounted rates to their users, so it may be worth comparing what those discounts are when selecting a platform. In our experience, they don't vary enough to really push merchants over the fence, but it sure helps to do your homework.

If you are thinking of offering a flat-rate (or free) shipping to your customers, then figuring out what your third-party rates are can be very helpful at determining what that flat-rate should be so that you're not losing too much on shipping fees.

Carrier rates are like oil; always influx, so it's important to have real time access to those on a daily basis. This is where order fulfilment software like ShipStation comes in handy. Shopify also will calculate third-party rates if you are on the Pro plan or the annual plan.

Should I offer a “free shipping for orders over \$XXX” deal?

The short answer is, you should definitely consider it, as long as you can manage eating the shipping cost of your products.

We wrote [a 3-part article series](#) on this subject that dives a little more into making that decision. Check that out and learn how to optimize that offer for maximum effectiveness!

That...is a lot of information! Remember, you can always [reach out to us here](#) if you have questions regarding your own situation. We are happy to help.

Wrapping up and next steps

That's it for this free book. Thank you again for taking the time to check it out. We really hope that it is helpful for you, at the very least of making this process less overwhelming.

[Please do reach out](#) if you have questions or would like to apply to work with us. We would love to meet you and hear more about your retail business.

We love working with store owners who are passionate about their products and their customers, so if that's you and you need help getting online, improving your in-store processes or your marketing, please go to [streamlineretail.com/contact](#) and we'll be ready to talk.