When adding e-commerce options to your retail store, remember that blending in-person and online buying allows shoppers to buy on their own terms.

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Taking the E-commerce Plunge

Online sales aren't limited to websites anymore. Leverage a variety of e-commerce strategies to enhance sales both in your store and with long-distance customers.

By KATIE NAVARRA

VIRTUAL SHOPPING EXPERIENCES enable retail stores to seemingly be "everywhere," but engaging in digital selling isn't limited to an online store website or email marketing. Advances in technology have made it simpler for businesses to sell on multiple platforms. One-click shopping, smartphone apps, text message sales and "buy online, pick up in-store," or BOPIS, give retailers more options for making sales.

"E-commerce" is the broad term used to describe the diverse platforms used for today's sales transactions. According to Statista.com's business data platform, worldwide retail e-commerce sales totaled $2.3 trillion in 2017. Experts anticipate those revenues will more than double by 2021.

"Although e-commerce isn't slowing down anytime soon, neither are traditional brick-and-mortar retail shops," says Carolyn Williamson, the chief marketing officer for CommentSold, a company that helps retailers sell via social media comments.

According to a U.S. Department of Commerce/U.S. Census Bureau second-quarter 2019 report, e-commerce has consistently made up only about 10 percent of total retail sales since the second quarter of 2018.

Williamson points out that a "hybrid" sales model that blends in-person and online buying captures shoppers in ways that allow them to buy on their own terms. It also allows retailers chances to build face-to-face relationships and then nurture those connections online.

"As a frequent traveler, it's exciting to visit a niche boutique somewhere and find out they have an online store to shop from later," she says.

To be successful in the digital marketplace, retailers need to understand the nuances of each platform to ensure they are profitable through that outlet, according to Baskar Agneeswaran, the founder and director of Vajro, a company that helps e-commerce stores build their own smartphone apps on both Android and iPhone platforms.

"The percentage of sales that the online channel contributes to the total sales may vary," Agneeswaran says. "While it may never match the physical store, the retailer has to make sure that the online channel is 'profitable' on its own."

E-COMMERCE MISTAKES TO AVOID

Here are five mistakes to avoid in e-commerce platforms, according to our experts.

1. Expecting technology to do it all. Don't expect it to run your business for you. People still drive the success of a retail social media page. Someone like an online brand influencer might make it look easy, but they do their fair share of making social media platforms work, according to Williamson.

2. Varying prices. "Your online price cannot be different from your store price," Agneeswaran says. "Selling through a retail outlet has its own costs, like rent, and selling online his its own costs, like shipping. But the customer expects the same price because the product is the same."

3. Trying to do it all yourself. Williamson points out the value of delegating tasks that you can. "Have you ever heard the saying, 'If you can find someone better at a job than you, who can do it faster and cheaper, you should let them?' " Williamson says. That includes finding ways to automate mundane tasks—like scheduling Facebook posts—so you can focus on building your brand and customer base. "Hashtag 'automate to dominate,' " she says.

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4. Thinking, "if you build it, they will come." Setting up an e-commerce platform doesn't mean people will find it or come to it. You still need to advertise your business, Williamson says, and do it across platforms.

5. Not being human enough. Customers buy from people they know and trust, Williamson says. Add an "About" tab to your website that tells your story and mission, frequently connect with your customers through social media, and provide excellent customer service response times along with a clear way to contact you.

With a variety of e-commerce options, many of which may be as simple as "drag and drop" functions on a website, retailers need to be strategic about incorporating what makes the most sense for their business. Here, Agneeswaran and Williamson explain several trending e-commerce tactics and offer advice to help retailers avoid costly mistakes.

BOPIS

Picture this: Your client needs a pair of boots before leaving for a horse show. She's busy packing the trailer for a week on the road and doesn't have time to browse the selection in-store. She always buys the same brand, so she knows what size fits. She goes to your online store, orders the boots, and stops to pick them up on her way to the feed store.

That's why the "buy online, pick up in-store" concept is wildly popular. Grocery stores, restaurants, home goods stores and more give customers the flexibility of filling their shopping carts from home and dropping by the store to collect the order.

"It's a win for you and the customer," Williamson says.

SMARTPHONE APPS

Traditionally, retailers relied on online stores designed for use on desktop or laptop computers, with graphics, menu listings and other components arranged for optimal viewing based on specifications for those larger screens.

"Sixty percent of buyers now access the online stores from their mobile phones," says Agneeswaran, meaning an online store design must take that into account.

Websites that are "mobile responsive" are programmed to automatically adjust their settings based on how a user is viewing the site. Some retailers today bypass the online store completely and instead opt for a smartphone app.

"Creating a proper channel for the mobile device by creating Android and iOS apps results in great user experience for the buyers," Agneeswaran says. "This, in effect, helps the retailers generate more sales, conversion and better customer engagement."

Vajro has simplified the process retailers need to follow for establishing an app by creating a platform where users can simply drag and drop to build their own app.

"Our clients don't need to know how to write a single line of code to build their e-commerce site," he says.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMMENTS

Social media has forever changed retail sales. Paid advertising and endorsements by prominent influencers via platforms like Instagram and Facebook greatly increase a store's reach, and retailers incorporate social media into their marketing efforts.

Now it's possible to sell through comments made on Facebook or Instgram posts. "Comment sellers" post a video or picture of the product and tell customers to declare their purchase by adding a "sold" comment to the post.

Companies like CommentSold help retailers efficiently track sales made this way. CommentSold's software tracks comments from photo or video posts and automatically invoices customers, saving retailers time and labor required to process the order.

"Saving time with social commerce automation and helping online retailers sell with innovative, fun technology is what we're known for," she says.

In addition, "live" selling amplifies comment-based sales, according to Williamson. Engaging with customers via Facebook Live triggers powerful human reactions. It can create urgency when used to liquidate old stock, show off and sell new arrivals, and generate hype through flash sales. During the live broadcast, viewers post "sold" to claim their item.

"A live broadcast gives customers a limited time to view and buy these items," Williamson says. "Live video also facilitates real-time conversations between owners and customers, and if done right, they're more meaningful than just a sale."

RELATIONSHIPS REMAIN KEY

Building relationships is crucial for any business. Customers are loyal to a brand because they have an emotional connection to it. Embracing the right e-commerce strategies enhances what is already working well for brick-and-mortar stores.

"Protect your brand by giving customers more than one way to shop," Williamson says. "It makes me nervous when I hear, 'I just sell on Facebook,' or 'I only sell on my website.' Don't rely on one channel to make all of your sales. Integrate ways to shop from mobile apps, social media, websites and even in person."

Leveraging the platforms that are the right fit for your business will only enhance and help grow sales. With multichannel retailing and a hybrid sales model, your shop becomes seemingly everywhere, which gives you more chances to reach current customers and acquire new ones. **WLR**

Give your customers more than one way to shop; don't rely on just one channel to make all of your sales.

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