Guide to Business Planning for Digital Marketing and Online Selling

# COASTAL VIRGINIA SMALL BUSINESS RESILIENCE SELF-ASSESSMENT AND GUIDE

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COMMONWEALTH CENTER FOR
RECURRENT FLOODING RESILIENCY

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Guide to Business Planning for Digital Marketing and Online Selling

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# INTRODUCTION

In the post-COVID world, most small businesses will have to balance in-person sales and services with those that are online, which is not easy to do. Many small businesses started as a way to serve their local communities, but to grow and be sustainable these businesses may also need to grow their online presence. Many small businesses in coastal Virginia and beyond have either added an online sales component or transitioned fully to online sales. It's important to realize that the move to online is a way to help your customers who want to support you and buy from you, and also to reach out to a wider audience of customers.

# BUILD YOUR ONLINE PRESENCE AND DIGITAL MARKETING

Even if you are not interested in selling online, you should establish an online presence and do some digital marketing. This is a crucial step for businesses that plan to sell online/pursue ecommerce.

Even if you are not interested in selling online, you should establish an online presence and do some digital marketing.

- There are several free local business directories you can use to build your online presence (more information on how to boost your online presence using these free local business directories):

  - o Google My Business listing allows you to connect with potential customers across Google Search and Google Maps, and helps improve your local SEO (search engine optimization or how high up your business shows up in web searches). You can customize your business profile by adding your business hours, location, services, photos, and any promotions you are offering.

  - o Yelp for Business listing can help you get in front of more potential customers as Yelp users tend to be customers who are motivated to buy. Yelp reports that 97% of users made a purchase at a business within a week of finding the business on Yelp.

  - o Angi (formerly Angie's List) is a tool for home contracting businesses to help get word out about your business, showcase your work, and manage your online reputation.

  - o Facebook Business page offers a way to share information about your business, encourage customers to leave reviews, and drive customers to your business' website. Once you have a Facebook Business page, your business can start showing up in relevant searches. You can also get listed on Facebook Places which helps Facebook users discover businesses in their local area. You can get featured on Facebook Places even if you don't have a Facebook Business page, but it works best when you use the two features in tandem. More resources from Facebook.

  - o Foursquare for business is an established business directory that millions of people visit to discover new local businesses. Claiming your listing here is another great way to connect with new potential customers. Claiming your listing is easy and gives you the ability to target local customers. Plus, you can

highlight any special offers or discounts you have going on. Foursquare users can also share feedback and photos from their visits to your business, which is a great way to encourage customer engagement.

- Make sure your business profile with the different listings is complete and stands out to potential customers. Include your business hours, highlight the products or services your business offers, and specify what differentiates you from your competitors.

# EXPAND TO E-COMMERCE AND ONLINE SALES

E-commerce refers to businesses, companies, and individuals selling goods or services online. Today, many products are sold and purchased via e-commerce platforms. These e-commerce platforms have tools that allow you to manage your business operations, sales and marketing by providing website hosting, secure transactions, and integration with other business tools (Quick overview of how e-commerce works).

- There are three popular options for selling online:

    O    An online marketplace

    O    Your own e-commerce site.

    O    On social media

    (Additional resources: The complete guide to selling online and How to sell stuff online: The 7 best places to start your online store).

**An easy way to start selling online is by listing products on online marketplaces like Etsy, Amazon, eBay, Google Shopping, and Walmart.**

## USE AN ONLINE MARKETPLACE

An easy way to start selling online is by listing products on online marketplaces like Etsy, Amazon, eBay, Google Shopping, and Walmart. These online marketplaces offer the benefit of access to existing customers who are already in the market for whatever it is you're selling. You create an account and profile for the business, list your products including providing descriptions, prices, images, and other information, and your products are available in an online store that already has customers. The online marketplace platform does the marketing work for you. Each marketplace comes with its own set of seller fees, commissions

| PROS: | CONS: |
|---|---|
| • Simple and easy to use. | • High competition from other merchants with similar products. |
| • Immediate access to potential customers. | • It may be difficult to differentiate your business from others. |
| • You just focus on your products and getting it out the door. The marketplace takes care of everything else. | |
| • With some marketplaces you can create your own store within the marketplace. | |

## Start an Amazon Store

It's hard to rival Amazon in terms of ease and access to customers. The competition for customers on Amazon can be fierce, so make sure you find ways to make your business stand out as much as possible.

- Take advantage of Amazon's Stores feature that allows you to create your own online store within Amazon.com. You can customize the look of your store, including adding pages and media such as text, images and videos. You can also get your own Amazon.com web address to use in marketing campaigns.

- Resources on opening an Amazon Store:

  - How to open an Amazon Store: Advice from people who have done it

  - How to build an Amazon Store: A step-by-step guide

## CREATE YOUR OWN E-COMMERCE SITE

If you create your own online store or e-commerce site, you'll want to use an e-commerce software or platform that can track your inventory and can facilitate transactions. The e-commerce platform, for example, provides website hosting, integrate with your sales tools, track what you have available, process financial transactions, ensure security, and more. You have the choice of self-hosting your own e-commerce platform, or using a hosted or cloud-based e-commerce platform.

| Self-Hosted: | Hosted/Cloud-Based |
|---|---|
| *Example: Magento and WooCommerce for WordPress* | *Example: Shopify, Shift4Ship, and BigCommerce* |
| You are responsible for finding hosting and managing software updates. This is more costly and time-consuming, but it could be the right choice for established businesses that need more customizations. You perform all of the design and upkeep yourself, and the company gives you the storage capacity (you pay for a set limit of resources and storage space). | Cloud-based platforms are typically easy to set up and they manage the installations for you. These platforms are good for beginners who want a simple way to set up a website and online store. Hosted e-commerce sites are all-inclusive platforms. They're easy to get up and running, and maintenance is taken care of for you. In most cases, all you'll have to do is decide on a layout and populate your site with content. |
| **PROS:** | **PROS:** |
| • Allows customization for your business | • You have a dedicated, centralized support team |
| • Greater control over content and layout | • Simple and quick to set up |
| • You can host on your own server | |

| *SELF-HOSTED (CONT'D)* | *HOSTED/CLOUD-BASED (CONT'D)* |
|---|---|
| **CONS:** | **CONS:** |
| • Can be time consuming | • Can be more expensive than self-hosted solutions |
| • Requires some basic technological competencies | • Your customization potential is limited to what your platform offers |
| • You are responsible for every facet of building and managing the site | |
| • No centralized support system | |
| • There's a danger of outgrowing your plan. | |

- Need assistance with selecting an e-commerce platform?

     o More information: Self-Hosted vs Hosted eCommerce Stores: What's Better for Your Business?

     o Here's a comparison of eCommerce platforms

     o Information on how to choose the best e-commerce platform

- Strategies and tips for setting up your online store

     o Consider your customers. Who are you trying to attract with your e-commerce page? The answer to that question will inform the design and setup of your site. Pick colors and designs that match the products you offer and don't be afraid to use a pre-built template. Include well-written product descriptions and high-resolution product photos.

     o Provide contact information where customers can easily find it. Include an email address, phone number and online form that customers can fill out, and links to your social media channels and product reviews.

     o Point of purchase: Make sure that every product listed on your site has a functional purchase button. And make sure that all of the purchase and shipping options listed are consistent across the appropriate products. Implementing third-party payment options will make payments more accessible.

     o Do regular site maintenance: Keeping your site updated and running smoothly is crucial to the continued success of your e-commerce site. Outdated information or technical issues could turn away potential customers.

## SELL ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is a great tool for promoting a specific product, building brand recognition, or reaching new customers, but these might not translate into online sales. Most social media users are in the browsing phase, rather than the purchasing phase, of shopping. Social media can play an important role in promoting products and businesses, but it is generally more challenging for small businesses to sell products and services through social media.

- Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, allow you to sell products via your social media account. However, all require you to have an e-commerce platform that you connect to your social media account. For example, you can link products in your e-Commerce store to Facebook and sell those products directly in Facebook. Or, you can use Instagram shoppable posts to advertise and sell. A well-shot photo or video of your product in an Instagram shoppable post can capture users' attention and users can be redirected to a page to buy the product. Again, you will need to connect your Instagram account to an e-commerce platform.

- More resources on selling on social media:

   o   Selling on Social Media: The Ultimate Guide to Profits

   o   3 Things You Need to Know About Selling on Instagram

   o   How to Sell on Instagram Using Shoppable Posts

| PROS: | CONS: |
|---|---|
| • Access to a vast social media audience | • Social media interactions are often in the browsing phase that does not directly lead to purchases. |
| • Can easily promote products and the business | • Requires an e-commerce platform |

# ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMERS

- Many of the same rules of in-person sales apply to online sales. You still need to work hard to attract customers and convince them to follow through on their purchase.

    O   Engage regularly and consistently to build trust. Dedicate time each day to check your social media feeds, respond to direct messages and engage in the comments.

    O   Be authentic and human. Don't rely on canned or automated responses.

    O   Mix up your content. Don't just respond to comments. Use contests, quizzes, polls to get audience's opinion. Promote discounts, loyalty points, memberships, giveaways, etc.

    O   Connect your social media to your digital listing and/or online store.

    (More on how to engage customers online to grow sales).

- Positive online reviews can also help boost your online visibility, so make sure you encourage your customers to leave you a review.

    O   How to encourage customers to leave good online reviews.

    O   How to make the most of review sites like Angie's List and Yelp

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