

How's

BUSINESS

A top-down photograph of a person's hands typing on a silver laptop keyboard. The person is wearing a blue denim jacket and a gold bracelet. To the left of the laptop is a white coffee cup with a black lid. The desk is made of light-colored wood. The background is a teal gradient.

**The business
owner's guide to
*eCommerce***

What's How's Business

Hello. First of all, we'd like to say a big thank you for downloading our guide. We're How's Business, the growth hub for York, North Yorkshire and East Riding. We're one of 39 growth hubs set up by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills.

Our role is to make it easy for business owners like you to find the support you need. This could be to locate funding, help with marketing, or advice on how to expand your set-up.

As our patch is quite rural, travel times can really cut into your day. So we try to focus on what's available locally. We've got a website, www.howsbusiness.org that plays a vital role in offering advice from anywhere with an internet connection.

We hope you find our guide really useful.



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Disclaimer

This guide's sole purpose is to introduce you to some of the basic concepts around eCommerce and to show a selection of the different platforms that are available .

If in doubt, always talk to an expert.

What's eCommerce

When you do your grocery shopping online, or buy a birthday present from Amazon, maybe get a tent from eBay or some bunting from Etsy: that's eCommerce.

In a nutshell, eCommerce is how you buy and sell things online and it has changed the way that we do business. A lot of high street businesses are feeling the pressure of having to compete with hundreds of thousands of digital stores that don't have to deal with the overhead costs of a physical presence. Plus, these competitors can offer an incredible range of niche goods that, at the drop of a hat, can be shipped all over the world.

eCommerce is a highly competitive and ever-growing market. But it does come with some major advantages.

It's never been easier to start your own business

With the right eCommerce platform and a couple of hours, you could create a shop capable of selling goods around the world.



eCommerce has potentially massive opportunities to grow your market

If you are a high street business trying to sell locally and thinking that your market is becoming increasingly limited, then by opening up an online store you can take advantage of larger national, and even international markets.

We know that we're living in uncertain times and the best thing we can recommend is to shore up your business against that uncertainty by looking at new potential markets.

To help you do that, we're going to look at some of the most popular eCommerce platforms: Shopify, WooCommerce, Etsy, eBay and Big Cartel.

So, let's get started.



<https://www.shopify.co.uk/>



<https://woocommerce.com/>



<https://www.etsy.com/>



<http://www.ebay.co.uk/>



<https://www.bigcartel.com/>

Where to sell online

Okay, so you've made the decision to sell online. The question is, which platform do you use? There are a lot of options out there.

Ultimately, there's no wrong answer, they will all help you to sell your stuff. You should consider, what do you really need from a platform? Although they might all look similar, they come with different features. The good news is: if you start using one platform and then need some extra functionality, you can potentially switch without having to spend too much time or money on the transfer. But when you're trying to get customers to buy, that time and money is crucial and the last thing you want is to go through a messy shift from one platform to another.

So, what do you need from an eCommerce platform? At a glance, here are some of the key features that you can expect to find on some of the top platforms available today:

Feature	Shopify	WooCommerce	eBay	Etsy	Big Cartel
What is it?	Shopify is one of the most popular eCommerce solutions on the web, primarily because of its scalability and simplicity to set up.	WooCommerce is famous for being free and for integrating with Wordpress, one of the most popular blogging platforms on the net.	What started out as an auction site is now one of the most popular markets for entrepreneurs looking to sell.	Etsy rose to fame as a marketplace for crafters to sell their wares. Over the past few years, it's grown to offer additional features for brands looking to establish themselves online.	Designed to make it easy for artists and makers to create an online store, Big Cartel isn't feature rich, but it does make it easy for you to get set up.

Feature	Shopify	WooCommerce	eBay	Etsy	Big Cartel
How easy is it to set up	It's got a bit of a learning curve to it and a lot of different buttons on the back end to set up. But it is very clearly documented and though it needs a little bit of time and patience, it doesn't need a developer.	Unless you're comfortable with web development, you're going to need a developer for this. Of all the options here, WooCommerce is the most complex to set up.	If you're already familiar with eBay, then setting up a store isn't going to be any trouble at all. If you want to customise the store, then you might want to work with a developer who can customise your page but ultimately, there aren't a lot of options for you to play with.	You don't need to be a developer to get to grips with Etsy. It's well documented as well, so you should be able to set up and go. It might take a bit of work getting used to the customisation tools, but it's quite simple. There's not a lot of options for doing anything here.	Big Cartel doesn't offer a lot of options, so it's very easy to use.
Cost	\$9-\$299 a month depending on what features you want. The most basic level is just a Facebook store, with more expensive packages offering additional features such as websites, giftcards and offline functionality.	Free, but prices for extensions can reach up to \$249. WooCommerce is the most flexible platform we've looked at but that flexibility comes at a cost. You'll need to pay for many of its additional features and get a developer to set it up for you.	Free-£217.38 a month (plus listing fees). eBay is free for a basic user, with eBay taking a cut of the profits you make from the site. Even once you've upgraded your account to having a shop, eBay will continue to charge you.	Free-\$15 a month (plus listing fees). Etsy is free to set up, with additional costs being added on for each item sold. There are also additional prices if you would like to set up your own website and custom theme.	Free-\$29.99 a month. Big Cartel's payment plans are mainly based around how many products you want to sell. As soon as you start paying for the cheapest account you get access to all the features on the site.

Feature	Shopify	WooCommerce	eBay	Etsy	Big Cartel
Provides analytics	This is one of the areas where Shopify really stands out. Its level of reporting, whether it's tracking visits to your store, abandoned shopping carts, or international taxes, is really impressive and if you need additional data, you can integrate Shopify with most leading analytics platforms.	Out of the bunch, WooCommerce has some limited analytics options that you can look at, but it gets really impressive once you can take advantage of the platform's extensions (which are paid and free) and which integrate WooCommerce with some seriously powerful analytics .	eBay offers a basic level of analytics for your business which becomes increasingly detailed at higher price plans. If you're looking to extend your analytics even further, eBay also offers an app store where you can integrate additional reporting software.	If you're thinking about using an Etsy store then you'll be able to find basic analytics as well as integrations with more detailed reporting packages.	Big Cartel is one of the most limited options out there in terms of analytics and reporting. However, if you're on a paid account then you are able to sync up with analytics packages.
Custom themes	Shopify's custom themes is where it performs really well. It comes with a good selection of free basic themes. They're not always the most imaginative but you can upgrade to a premium theme either on Shopify from another store or you can hire a web developer to make something for you.	One of the big selling points of WooCommerce is its customisation. It has a few free themes that are available, but if you want something that looks halfway decent, you'll want to buy a premium theme from an online theme store or else hire a developer to make something for you.	If you've paid for your own store front on eBay then you can customise it. However, the options are probably the least adventurous of the ones we've listed here.	If you've opted to pay for your own store front on Etsy, then you can customise the theme. However, there isn't a huge amount of variation and customisation on offer here.	Yes, there are a number of free themes that you can use, as well as developers who have made their own designs. Alternatively, you could hire a developer to design something unique for you.
Requires hosting	No	Yes	No	No	No

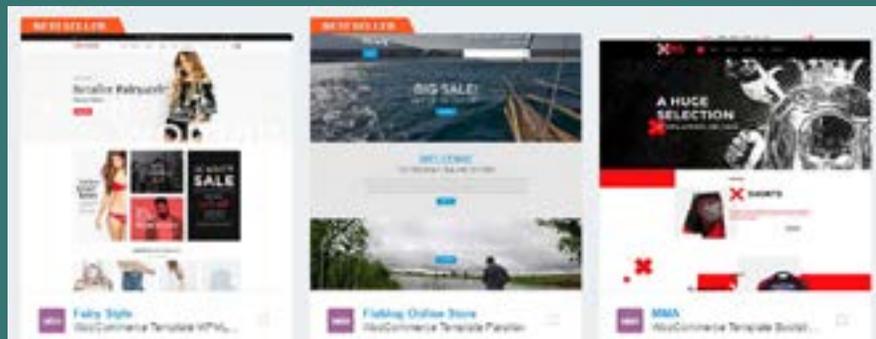
Feature	Shopify	WooCommerce	eBay	Etsy	Big Cartel
Part of a market place	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Your own store front	Yes (only on some subscriptions)	Yes	Yes (only on some subscriptions)	Yes (only on some subscriptions)	Yes
Your own domain	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Comes with a blog	With some themes	No, it's designed to integrate with your existing Wordpress blog	No	No	No
What's it great at	Shopify is a great, scalable solution that can take you from running a Facebook store to an international empire and it can be used without needing a web developer. Behind-the-scenes it does require a bit of setting up, but it's not unmanageable.	WooCommerce was designed with flexibility and customisation in mind. Unless you're comfortable with web development you're going to need to hire an expert to set it up, but if you want something that's just right, this might be the solution for you.	With 162 million people making purchases on eBay, it's greatest asset is its customers. It's one of the most restrictive eCommerce platforms out there, but if you're looking for easy access to a large audience, it's hard to beat.	If you are selling vintage or handmade goods, there are few better market places than Etsy for promoting your wares. If that's not your market though, you'll be better off selling elsewhere.	If you're looking for something with an easy learning curve and you don't need it to come with a lot of features, then Big Cartel is a great, low cost solution to get you started.

Ultimately, eCommerce solutions share a lot of similar features, so regardless of which platform you use, you should be able to use all of them to sell your products online. The deciding factor is likely to be what you feel most comfortable using and what your future needs are likely to be. With the exception of eBay, all the solutions we've listed here have free trial options for you to look into. So, before getting started, why not take the platforms out for a test spin. But if you're still not sure, have a chat with an expert on How's Business.

Pick a template for your store:

If you're using an eCommerce option that will let you customise the look of your store, then it's time to talk themes.

It's best to think of a theme like an outfit for your online store, with the bones being all the behind-the-scenes stuff: its products, how it handles transactions, and the information on the About Us page, all of which will stay the same until you alter it. But you can change the outfits that your store is wearing to give it different looks without modifying the bones that sit underneath.



This also means, in most cases, you can try on different themes before deciding on the one that's right for you.

So, how to pick the perfect theme? Your theme is going to play a big part, not only in how customers experience your store, but also in controlling its features and layouts.



If your store allows you to use themes, then it should come with its own integrated market place where you can choose from a mix of free and paid themes. You might have already browsed through them before deciding which eCommerce platform to use.

In most cases, you won't just be limited to the themes on the market place, most of the big eCommerce platforms

will also allow you to get a developer to create a shop front for you (expensive), or let you buy themes from external market places (less expensive). Buying from an external market place can involve a bit more set-up time in order to get it working on your store, but if you're reasonably tech savvy then you should get on fine.

Picking what your online store will look like is an exciting decision and it's a big one too. It's your chance to show off your store to the world and with so many options to choose from, including both free and paid templates, what should you be looking for to begin with?



Well, before you get started it's worth taking a look at some of the key needs that your business is going to have.

First of all, you're going to want a site that can easily be

found on search engines, so having something that is responsive (meaning it can be seen on mobile devices as well) is a must.



Ensure that if you're using a template, it's compatible with different browsers. Not every customer will be looking at your site on the same system that you are. As a minimum, it should be compatible with Chrome, Firefox, Safari, Opera, Edge, Internet Explorer 10 and Internet Explorer 11.

If you're using a template, finding something that has been updated recently is a wise move. Buying an updated template doesn't guarantee that it will continue to be updated, but it's a good start. The last thing you want to do is to find the perfect template but then two weeks later, discover that you need to pay a developer to keep it running.

If you want to get a theme for your store, then you can find free and paid themes that are supported by the eCommerce platforms they were developed for.

Shopify

<https://themes.shopify.com/>

Woo Commerce

<https://woocommerce.com/product-category/themes/>

Etsy

<https://www.etsy.com/uk/pattern> (theme customisation available with Pattern)

eBay

<http://pages.ebay.com/cr/en-us/storefronts/designtemplates.html>

Big Cartel

<https://www.bigcartel.com/> (themes available once you've created a store)

Paid themes for Shopify, WooCommerce are also available from Theme Forest, which provides details on the features and compatibility of the them:

<https://themeforest.net/>

Understanding what you want from an eCommerce store is important because you want to make sure that when a customer visits your site, that site does the best possible job of representing you.

Other questions you might want to ask yourself include: how is a customer going to find what they want to buy? Where would you want your products to sit? If possible, ask your friends and family to take a look at the theme you're thinking about using and see if it's something that they would buy from. Yes that home page might look really fancy, but does a customer know where to go from there?

Ultimately, there's a lot that goes into picking a theme and the chances are, you'll look at and try out some different options before you find the one that works best for you.

We recommend to keep your costs down when you're working with themes. When you're starting out, make use of the free themes that are out there. They might not be perfect, but you can still stand out with great photography and a strong brand and the experience of using a free template can help you to have a more informed conversation with a web developer down the line.



Set up your product pages on the website

So, you've got your online shop set up, now it's time to put your products on it. If you're able to spare the cash, then you might be able to find a photographer or copywriter (or someone who can do both) to photograph your products and write their descriptions, but there's a chance that you might need to look at what you can do yourself.

Let's start with photography. The chances are, you might already have everything that you need to take photos for your website either with your phone, tablet or a camera. Here, the quality of photo that you'll get will depend on the equipment that you're using.

Here's some general tips to bear in mind though, no matter what you're taking photos of:



1. Trust the automatic settings on your camera. They're actually pretty good and a lot of cameras come with different presets so you might already have a setting that's great for product shots.

2. Take photos in good light. Good light means better photos. The darker it is, the more likely your photos are to come out really dark, really grainy, or really blurry, and you don't want any of that. Taking the photos outside, or in a well lit room, will help to make your products pop.



3. When you're taking the photos, take them on the highest quality settings and try to give yourself a bit of extra room around the edges. You can crop the photo to size later. That extra room will help you to size your photos for different platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest.

4. Edit your photos. Cameras will, naturally, take a flat looking photo. Photography pros will then take those images into something like Photoshop to make them pop, but there's no need to shell out big wads of cash for something like that. There are plenty of free and cheap photo editors out there, some of which you can use directly on your tablet or iPad. Try looking at something like GIMP (<https://www.gimp.org/>), Paint.Net (<http://www.getpaint.net/index.html>) or Photoshop Elements (<http://www.adobe.com/uk/products/photoshop-elements.html>) to bring some life into your pictures.

5. Write some great copy. You need to convince your customers that they need your product. How you write the copy depends on the tone and voice of your brand. It should reflect the identity of your business but it also needs to explain what the product is and convince the customer to buy before they leave your site.

6. Get your products found online. Search Engine Optimisation, or SEO to the initiated, is the holy grail of copywriting. If your product descriptions are optimised for search engines, it means that they're more likely to be found online. That means if someone is searching for artisan pork pies, you can stand a better chance of being the shop that they visit. There are plenty of SEO resources on Google, but if in doubt, feel free to bring in an SEO expert who can help you get up to speed.



Get your product out to your customers

You've got a website, it's set up how you want and you've got products on it. The next step is to start thinking about how you're going to get your products out to your customers. Is this something that you can do yourself? Do you have a member of staff who can be responsible for it? Can you rope in family or friends? Or do you have enough funds to hire a third party?

Ultimately, the option you choose will depend on what resources you have available. Fortunately, there are a number of tools and services that make it easier for you to ship your products to potential customers.



Royal Mail's Price Finder is a great place to start when calculating the postage for delivery <http://www.royalmail.com/price-finder> and is one of

the best options out there when looking for a courier who can easily deliver low value items.



Alternatively, you might want to use a courier service like DPD which not only delivers your items, but can also be used to warehouse and ship them as

well, giving you the chance to spend more time on your business. They don't list their services on their website though; if you'd like to find out which of their services might be most suited to you and what the price might be, you'll need to get in touch. <http://www.dpd.co.uk/index.jsp>





Confused as to which shipping option is right for you? ShipStation is designed to integrate with all the eCommerce platforms that we've looked at today to easily process your orders, update your customers, work out which courier will be the cheapest to use. It also allows you to manage all of your orders in one place, even if you're using a bunch of different couriers.

<http://www.shipstation.com>



Don't want to warehouse and ship products yourself? You can outsource the hard work by using a fulfillment warehouse that will be responsible for holding and shipping your stock while matching your brand requirements. This is one of the best options out there for eCommerce businesses who



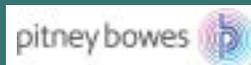
are starting to grow and who aren't ready to create their own shipping department just yet. Take a look at Core, <http://www.corefulfilment.com>



Shipwire, <https://www.shipwire.com/> and Fulfillrite <http://fulfillrite.com/>



If you're exporting your goods to another country, then you'll need to declare a commodity code for your goods to ensure that the appropriate level of duties and taxes are paid. To find the commodity code for your products, you can use the online trade tariff tool, here: <https://www.gov.uk/trade-tariff/sections>



Finally, if you're unsure about what import duties and taxes might need paying on your products, then you might want to use a tool like the PB Global Trade Solutions duty calculator that can provide you with import duty and tax guides for each country that you deal with. <http://www.dutycalculator.com>

Next steps

Hopefully, we've introduced you to the benefit of eCommerce and helped you to decide which platform might be right for you. But before we say goodbye, we thought we'd offer you a few more places you can go for general business advice.

The National Business Support Helpline:

If you need some free advice for your business. Give the folk at the National Business Support Helpline a ring. Their advice is free, and the number is **0300 456 3565**

Articles, Experts and Events on How's Business

We've got stacks of useful articles, loads of trusted local experts and a great choice on networking events on How's Business so feel free to browse until your heart's content.

