Shop window

Exploring the latest in everything digital

Integrations with retail platforms have become increasingly important since the onset of the pandemic. A lot of clients have pivoted to taking cash online, but how do they hook up all the processes so business is recorded seamlessly and accurately?

Online retail has proven to be a lifeline for so many businesses over the course of the pandemic, and while society and the economy are reopening after the lifting of restrictions, retail platforms will form a crucial part of the recovery for businesses.

With such an enormous variety of options on the market for businesses to choose from, it can be a little overwhelming. So, how do you choose?

1 Marketplace vs commerce platform

There is a key distinction to be established early on between marketplaces and e-commerce platforms. The most prominent marketplace is Amazon, which lets you sell through its marketplace alongside other online sellers. Shopify, meanwhile, is one of the most well-known specialised retail platforms, and allows you to build your very own online shop.

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2 User experience and ease of use

Many of the platforms available do well in this regard, with a strong line in facilitating the sale of products and proving straightforward to use.

"Many of the retail platforms, such as eBay and Amazon, are open and very easy to use," explains Will Blower, founder of Peterborough-based firm Realise Finance. It's important, though, to ensure you're using the right platform for your product, he notes. "Some retail formats are more appropriate for some products than others. For example, Etsy is focused on handmade or vintage items and craft supplies. When I had a venture selling phones and video games nationally, I used eBay as that fit the product better."

3 Integrations

While easy to use, many platforms do not directly integrate with accounting software, so it can be important to employ a data standardisation programme to allow your accounting software to interpret it properly.

"I use a programme called Greenback to do that," explains Blower. "It can import the data from the retail platforms and either into your accounting software or into Excel in a usable format. Without it or something similar, you'd need to put the retail platform data directly into Excel and tidy it up."

4 Customisation

A key decision for many businesses is whether they should

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> **"Some retail formats are more appropriate for some products than others. For example, Etsy is focused on handmade or vintage items and craft supplies."**

customise the purchasing experience to match the rest of their website. Not all retail platforms on the market can do this, and there are pros and cons to doing so, explains Blower, so it is a case of weighing these up.

"You can link some platforms, such as Shopify, to your website and have it look the way you want. Shopify works more as a tool than, say, eBay, which is more of a platform through which you sell your products. It depends on what you're selling, but customers may feel more comfortable buying through a platform they recognise, such as Amazon, rather than an unfamiliar website."

5 Scalability and flexibility
For Becky Glover FMAAT, co-founder of online English and Welsh wine merchant, Elizabeth Rose Wines, this is a crucial point.

"We have nearly 200 products on our site, and they're constantly changing with vintages and we mix and match our cases frequently, so we have a certain amount of those available," she explains. "We needed something that could handle that, but would also be quick in providing us with the facts. Quite a lot of e-commerce platforms are really good for having 10 or 20 products, but having the number we've got it's important to have something that will reach our scale and provide detailed reporting."

For your app stack

Having the right retail tools can help a business reach the next level. Here are some of the most widely-used options on the market

AMAZON

Amazon, as we all know, is the largest online marketplace in the world, and receives an enormous amount of traffic. That can be a double-edged sword, however, as there is a lot of competition for customers given the millions of products it sells.

Requirements: *None*
Price: *From 75p per item or £25 per month*

SHOPIFY

Shopify gives you the tools to build your very own online store, and is straightforward to set up and customise. It is capable of syncing orders across various sales channels and integrating with your accounting software.

Requirements: *QuickBooks Online, Xero*
Price: *From $29 (£22) per month*

BIGCOMMERCE

BigCommerce is a hosted e-commerce platform for fast-growing and mid-market online retailers, merchants and businesses. Its software enables users to sell and manage products online through their store-front or other channels such as in-store, Facebook, Amazon, Instagram or Ebay.

Requirements: *QuickBooks Online, Xero*
Price: *From £23 per month*

SQUARESPACE

SquareSpace is primarily a website-building tool, but it includes a customisable online store facility for both products and services, so customers can purchase your products and schedule appointments. You can also collect customer emails and build mailing lists to help grow and maintain your customer base.

Requirements: *None*
Price: *From £15 per month*

RICHARD GLEED

CASE STUDY

"HAVING THE RIGHT RETAIL PLATFORM IS FUNDAMENTAL TO MY BUSINESS"

Becky Glover FMAAT admits she had "no knowledge of retail and e-commerce platforms" when she and her friend, Sara Thake, founded their online wine merchant, Elizabeth Rose Wines.

Glover quickly realised that the right e-commerce platform would become crucial to how the business would function – so she set about ensuring the platform they selected had the functionality and flexibility required to meet the needs of their growing business.

Having decided to build their website on Wordpress, they opted to use its proprietary e-commerce platform, WooCommerce.

"We break things down by county, so if you want a wine from the South West or East Anglia, you can sub-categorise your products," Glover explains. "It controls our inventory and bundles products as well. That means that when we do cases of six wines, it will individually track those items. Similarly, it deals with all of our coupons and rules, such as 5% off when someone buys six bottles together and 10% off for 12."

That automation and intuitive nature is crucial for Glover and Thake, who run Elizabeth Rose Wines alongside their full-time jobs.

"All of this automation is particularly important for us because we don't want to double up on work or do basic things." Glover says. "Simple things like copying and pasting delivery addresses, counting down the stock for us is extremely helpful."

Tips to get started

BE MOBILE-FRIENDLY
Using mobile-friendly retail platforms expands your reach as a business and lends you greater credibility with customers.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT PLATFORM
Make sure your chosen mode of sale fits your product. No-one goes to Etsy to buy electrical goods, for example.

STANDARDISE YOUR DATA
While you may be using the ideal retail platform for your product, investing in a data-standardisation will save an awful lot of time and effort.