



4 REASONS WHY YOU NEED TO GET ON-BOARD WITH E-COMMERCE

Low-cost apps make it easy to provide a great customer experience.

Online shopping is growing fast in Canada and that means e-commerce is quickly becoming a necessity for Canadian retailers and even many B2B companies.

The good news is that it has never been easier for smaller companies to get into e-commerce and reap the many benefits.

Here are four key advantages e-commerce can bring your business.

1. Lower operating costs

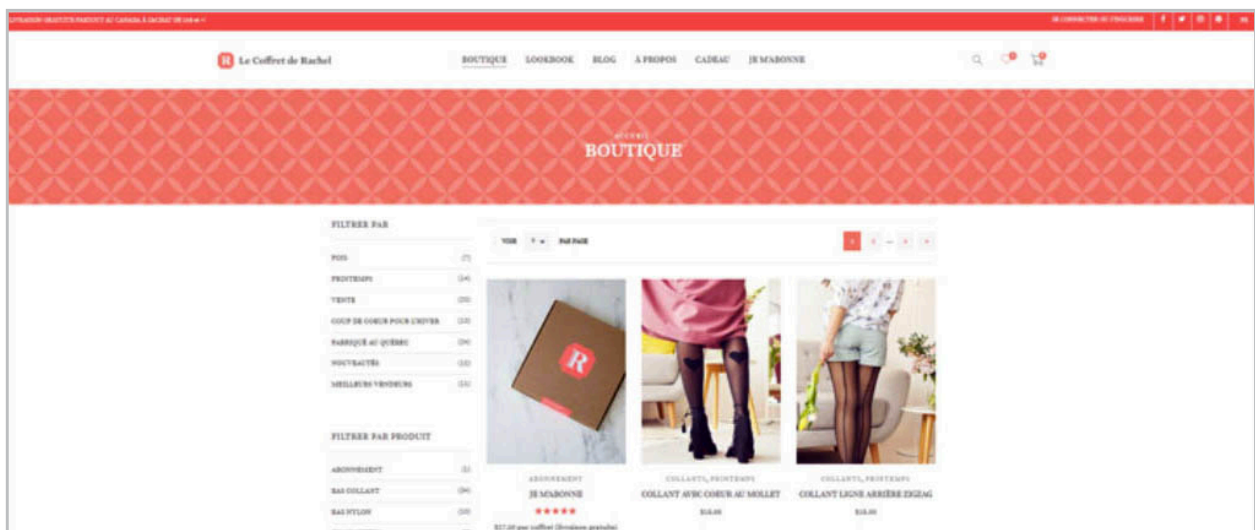
It is inexpensive to set up an e-commerce operation thanks to low-cost platforms. These services make it easy for entrepreneurs to start an online store with everything from an attractive, mobile-friendly site to taking payments to manage inventory and shipping. They can also integrate sales and inventory management between your online and bricks-and-mortar operations.

Of course, there will be lots of details to work out and challenges to overcome, but your upfront investment will be relatively low, especially compared to setting up a physical store.

As you become more successful, you can ramp up your spending to increase your product offerings, do more targeted advertising, create content and eventually build a custom site.

The three founders of From Rachel, a Montreal company that sells funky, high-stockings and leggings, used a WordPress platform to launch their online store in 2014 and will soon be launching a new site using Shopify.

Thanks to their cool branding and highly personalized service, partners Carolyn Parent, Alyeska Guillaud, and Mélanie Heyberger have tripled sales every year and are now exploring the U.S. market.



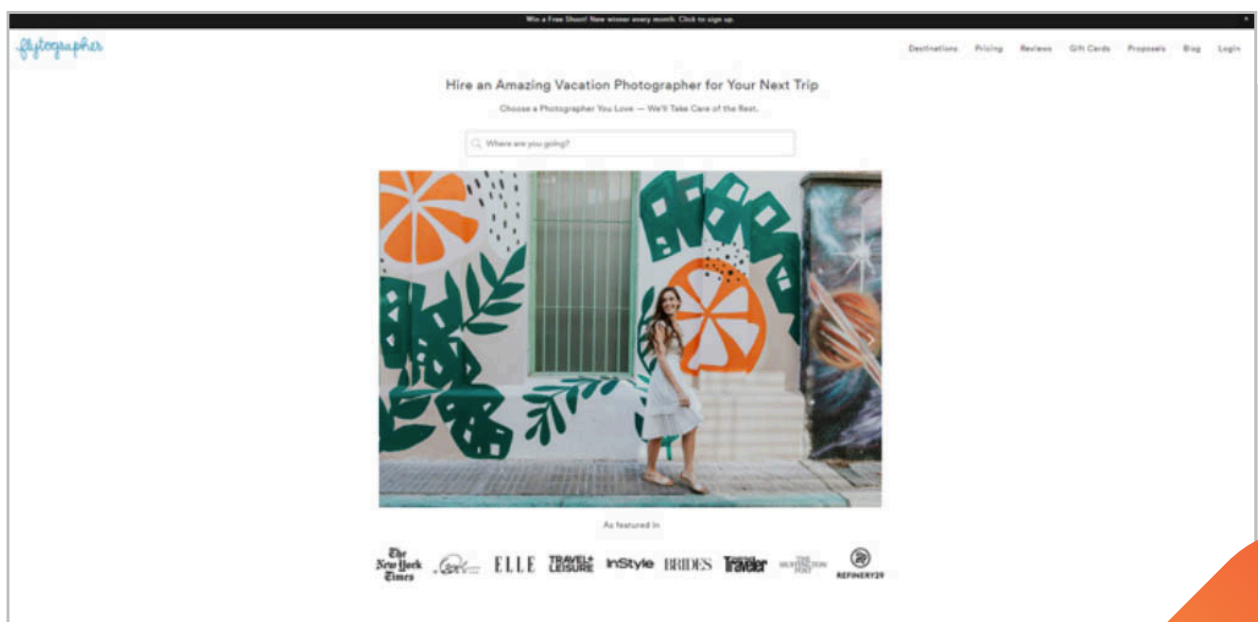
2. Track your customers

The beauty of e-commerce is the amount of information you can harvest about your customer's thanks to web analytics.

You can track where they come from, where they go on your site and what they buy. You can then use the data to optimize your online store. What are your most popular products? Where do people leave the site? What design tweaks and promotions generate increased sales? You can also use many of those insights to boost sales in your physical store.

Nicole Smith's team works hard on analytics at her company, Flytographer. It's a platform that connects vacationers with professional photographers in more than 200 cities around the world.

To improve sales and create new products, Flytographer constantly studies data generated by its website, online marketing efforts, and booking platform. The Victoria company "tries to understand how we can remove friction and inject delight" at every customer touchpoint, Smith says.



3. Improve your customer experience

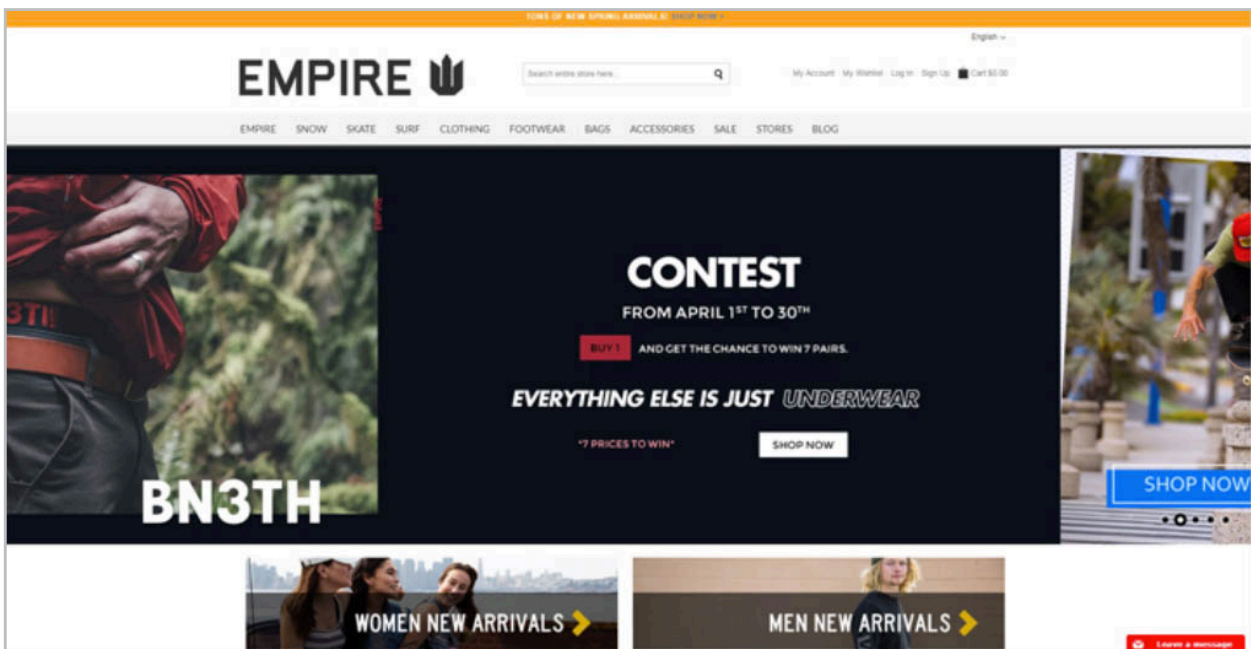
An ever-growing number of consumers are shopping online, but many also want an in-store experience - the ability to touch and try merchandise while getting advice from your staff. An e-commerce site gives customers the best of both worlds.

Your site will provide customers with the convenience of 24/7 shopping from anywhere. You can make the experience even better with apps that allow customers to examine your merchandise up close and chat with your staff.

At the same time, you can use your e-commerce capability to improve your in-store experience by arming your employees with smartphones or tablets. They can show shoppers products online as they accompany them through your store and even take orders right on the spot.

Empire Sports, a fast-growing chain of the skateboard, snowboard, and clothing stores, caters to customers both online and at its 10 bricks-and-mortar locations across Quebec.

“There is a fair number of customers who will buy a snowboard online without touching it with their hands, but others won’t do that,” Empire President Philippe Grisé says. “A lot of them want to come in-store to get technical information from competent staff and also touch and compare the product to other brands and models.”



4. Expand your reach

E-commerce allows your company to punch above its weight against much larger competitors and expand your geographic reach beyond your community to your region, the whole country, or foreign markets.

The 7 Virtues is a Halifax company that makes “peace perfumes” from essential oils imported from rebuilding countries, including Afghanistan, Haiti, and Rwanda.

The fragrances sell in 70 Hudson’s Bay and 70 Sephora stores in Canada and President Barbara Stegemann expects to soon expand to Sephora stores across the U.S. The 7 Virtues also sells to customers in Canada via its online store on a WordPress platform.

“Our online store really complements our brick-and-mortar presence,” Stegemann says. “You really need to go into the store to figure out what your signature scent is. Then, once you know and you want to replenish, online is the perfect way to save time.”

“It also works the other way. We post articles and have a magazine featuring female role models and when people go online and read these insightful articles on our site, it makes them curious and they visit the stores.”



Tips for e-commerce success

- **Start small**
Don't get bogged down trying to create a huge, high-end website featuring hundreds of products. Start with a free or low-cost e-commerce site, and test three or four products to gauge customer interest while working out the kinks in your ordering and fulfillment process.
- **Test, learn, improve**
Don't expect to be flawless with your first efforts. Technology allows you to try things quickly and economically and improve.
- **Be attractive**
Feature attractive product images, clear descriptions, and an easily navigable layout, so visitors can quickly find what they're looking for and make a purchase. Also, engage visitors with fun and educational extras: How-to tips for products, interesting videos, and background information on the story of your company.

Source: bdc.ca