



eCommerce Platform Comparison Guide





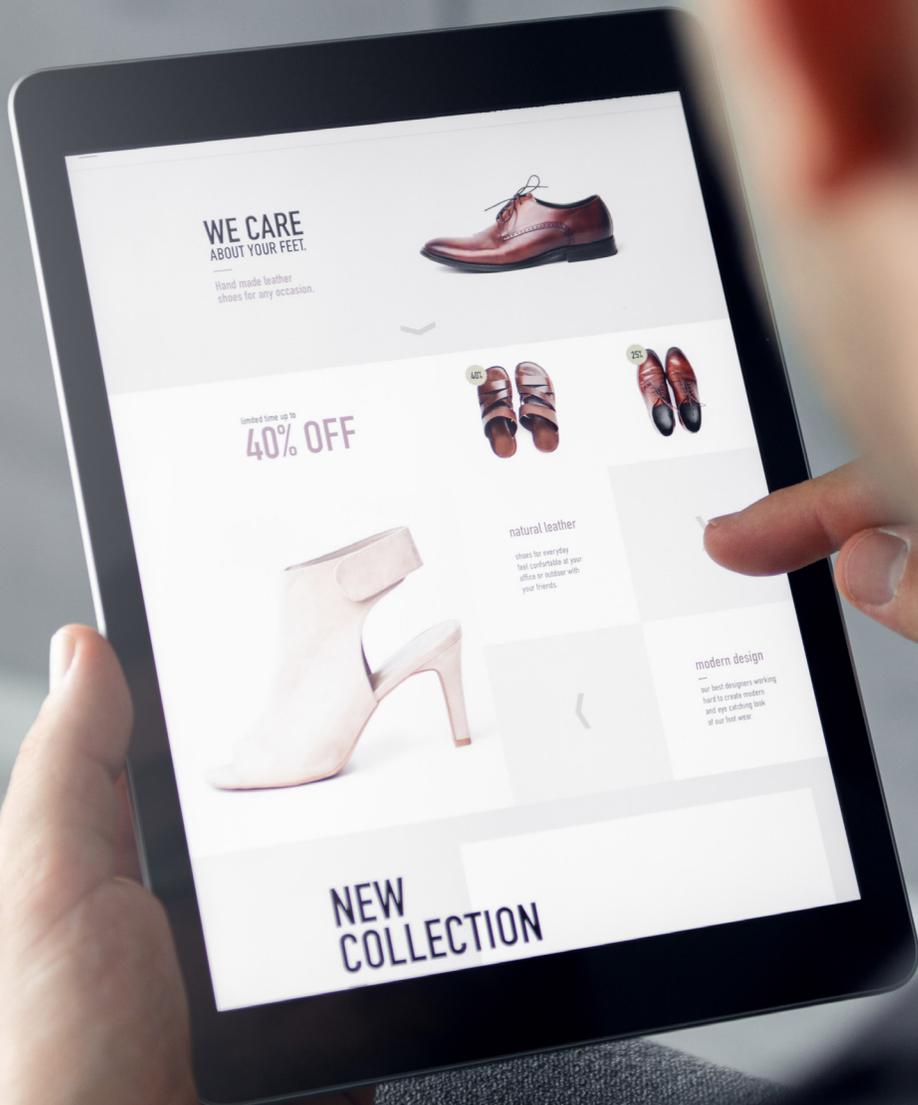
Whether you've been selling successfully on marketplaces and are now wanting to expand your reach, or you are just getting started and looking to launch your own webstore, choosing the best eCommerce platform is no easy feat.

In fact, with hundreds of website platforms available to choose from, making the best choice (and investment) for your business can be a huge challenge.

But it doesn't have to be.

To help you make the best decision from the outset, we've compared nine of the leading eCommerce platforms, covering everything from ease-of-use and SEO capabilities, right through to support, pricing and scalability.





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The difference between hosted and self-hosted platforms

Before we dive into the comparison, it's important to understand the difference between both types of website platforms; hosted and self-hosted.





1. Hosted eCommerce platforms

A hosted eCommerce platform is usually paid for through a monthly recurring subscription fee and is located on external servers.

In other words, you can access your online store through your web browser.

Advantages of hosted eCommerce platforms

The main benefit of a hosted eCommerce platform is that the solution will control the web hosting for your online store.

This includes automatic updates to your software, as well as managing the security of your site, saving you a lot of time, money and additional resources, for example the need to hire someone with web development knowledge.

As this type of platform is accessed via the internet, you can check on your online shop as and when you please, on any device.

Disadvantages of hosted eCommerce platforms

One of the main disadvantages associated with hosted eCommerce platforms is the lack of flexibility in what you can customise and control.

As an online store is hosted by its software provider, some businesses find they outgrow hosted solutions quickly or that there are certain functionalities their business needs but cannot implement.

Another issue you may run into is speed of delivery. As a hosted eCommerce platform can only be accessed on the web, a slow internet connection may reduce your overall business productivity and performance.

This can especially be the case if your external servers are hosted several countries away from you. For example, a UK-based business with servers hosted in India is likely to run into more server problems than a business using local servers in the UK.



2. Self-hosted eCommerce platforms



In comparison, self-hosted eCommerce platforms use open source software and are free to download and use. That said, there are several “hidden costs” you’ll need to factor in. You also control your web hosting which means you also have full control over your website.

Advantages of self-hosted eCommerce platforms

What makes self-hosted eCommerce platforms unique is that the code can be legally manipulated or modified to meet the needs of your business and customers (known as open source software). As such, one of the main benefits is the flexibility and freedom to create what you want, exactly how you want it.

With a self-hosted eCommerce platform, you’ll also benefit from full control over your business and your data will not be shared with your eCommerce platform, unlike a hosted solution.

Another advantage is that open source software is often seen as the most cost-effective option for scaling an online business in the long run. Investing now (if you have sufficient resources) can save you a lot of time and money further down the line.

Disadvantages of self-hosted eCommerce platforms

To gain the full benefits of open source self-hosted platforms, you’ll need access to an experienced web developer or be able to afford to hire a professional to help you. This can set you back thousands, but could be a worthwhile investment, depending on your goals.

Even with a developer on your team, a self-hosted eCommerce platform can still have a bit of a learning curve. Depending on the scope of your project, this may require several weeks or months of work, which can be a drawback for businesses who need to turn a profit as soon as possible.

Depending on the technical expertise of your team, you may find that you need to buy several extensions and add-ons to get the same basic functionalities that generally tend to come with a hosted eCommerce platform. It’s also worth being aware that the freedom to create comes with far more responsibility. As you control every aspect (from web hosting to site maintenance to security compliance checks) your team will need to have the capacity to be able to stay on top of everything.



eCommerce platform selection criteria

With so many eCommerce platforms available, it can be difficult to work out which solutions are worth reviewing and comparing.

What's more, sifting through the big swamp of conflicting advice on the web can be a lengthy process for many online sellers.

In order to give you a head start to find the right solution to support your business, we have reviewed ten eCommerce platforms.

While many of these are considered to be industry leaders, others are growing in popularity and, as such, are platforms we believe are worth keeping an eye on.



So, what criteria have we used to compare these nine eCommerce platforms?



1. Ease of use

When looking for the best eCommerce platform, a lot of businesses need to prioritise how easy a particular solution is to use. Business owners often require a solution that is simple and intuitive to use as staff of all abilities may need to use or be trained to use the software.

For this reason, we've given high priority to what the software looks like, how easy it is to set up, add products and maintain, and whether or not integrating the platforms with other systems and software is a simple process.

2. Time to market

How quickly you want to be able to start selling online will affect your choice between eCommerce platforms in a pretty huge way. Some solutions provide the means to set up a shop over a weekend, while others may require a few solid weeks or months of work. If, however, you're serious about achieving your business goals and have yet to start selling through

your own website, then you may want to consider putting more time and effort into setting your shop exactly how you want it rather than rushing it over a weekend – standing out is key.

That said, a really common business need is to be able to sell products quickly. This makes sense as you'll need to be covering the cost of selling online as soon as possible so that you can start to turn a profit and grow your business.

3. Search engine optimisation capabilities

Did you know not being present on the first five pages of search results can lead to a 90% reduction in natural click-throughs to your website? And around 60% of searchers no longer look beyond the first page of results? Generating website traffic is half the battle when it comes to running a successful online business; if you don't know the [ins and out of search engine optimisation](#), then you'll want to be looking for a platform that can provide you some support with this.

4. Additional marketing features

If getting visitors to your website is half the battle, the other half is turning these visitors into paying customers. If you don't have a marketing professional on your team, then you'll need to look for a solution that can provide ways to help you overcome these issues.

For example, [shopping cart abandonment](#) is one of the biggest challenges faced by online sellers. A simple way to reduce these lost sales is through email marketing - your chosen eCommerce platform should provide you with the means to do this.

Another beneficial marketing feature often offered by eCommerce platforms is the means to integrate a blog to your website. This allows you to create content for your customers to read and follow and should help you to improve your search ranking naturally.



5. Design

A key factor that will affect how successful your website is with your customers is what it actually looks like. You need to be able to design a storefront that conforms to the expectations of online shoppers but also enables you to stand out from your competition.

Different eCommerce platforms offer a different level of design and customisation, which is why it's important to know what different solutions are available to you. Alternatively, you may consider outsourcing your store design – an extra cost you'll need to factor in on top.

Some solutions provide you with free shop layouts with minimal editing, some provide drag and drop website builders and some give you the means to build your own website exactly how you want.

6. Customer support

Imagine you come across an eCommerce platform that ticks every single one of your boxes, but you reach a problem that you or the techie on your team can't resolve.

An effective customer support team can be invaluable to the success of your online store. This is particularly the case with hosted eCommerce solutions (e.g. Shopify or BigCommerce), as such platforms are responsible for updating and fixing bugs in the software for you.

The level of customer support you'll need from the outset can play an important factor when comparing eCommerce platforms. Poor customer service experiences can create unhappy customers who will then look towards other solutions.

7. Online resources and community

An important but often overlooked factor is the number of online resources provided by eCommerce platforms to support the growth of your business.

It is perfectly possible to learn the ins and outs of various eCommerce software if the resources are there.

What's more, a lively and responsive community forum filled with other online sellers or developers can often provide a faster way to get a solution to any problems or bugs that you experience.

No software is completely flawless.



8. Scalability

The scalability of an eCommerce platform is an important factor to consider. We've talked to many established online sellers who became too big for their eCommerce platform too quickly and had to migrate to a new platform that could accommodate their needs.

Migration can be an expensive and time-consuming process – especially when your business is already up and running. Generally speaking, it doesn't make much business sense to be switching between platforms more than once every 3-5 years minimum.

If you're new to selling online or you don't yet have a reliable flow of customers, then whether or not you can scale with your platform may be last on your list of priorities. However, keeping scalability in mind can save you many extra costs further down the line.

9. Pricing and packages

Last but not least, how much an eCommerce platform costs to run is almost always going to be a key factor – especially if you're a home business or new to selling online. Being able to keep your costs down where possible can be crucial to whether or not you turn a profit.

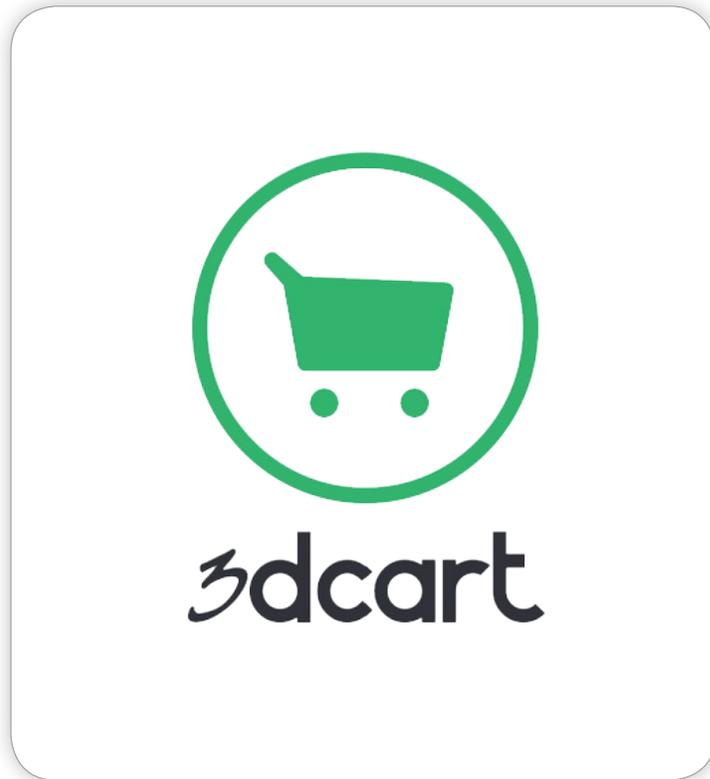
Although it's vital to go with a solution that sits within your budget, if you're serious about the growth of your business then you need to look at it like an investment rather than going with the cheapest eCommerce platform available.





Individual eCommerce Platform Reviews





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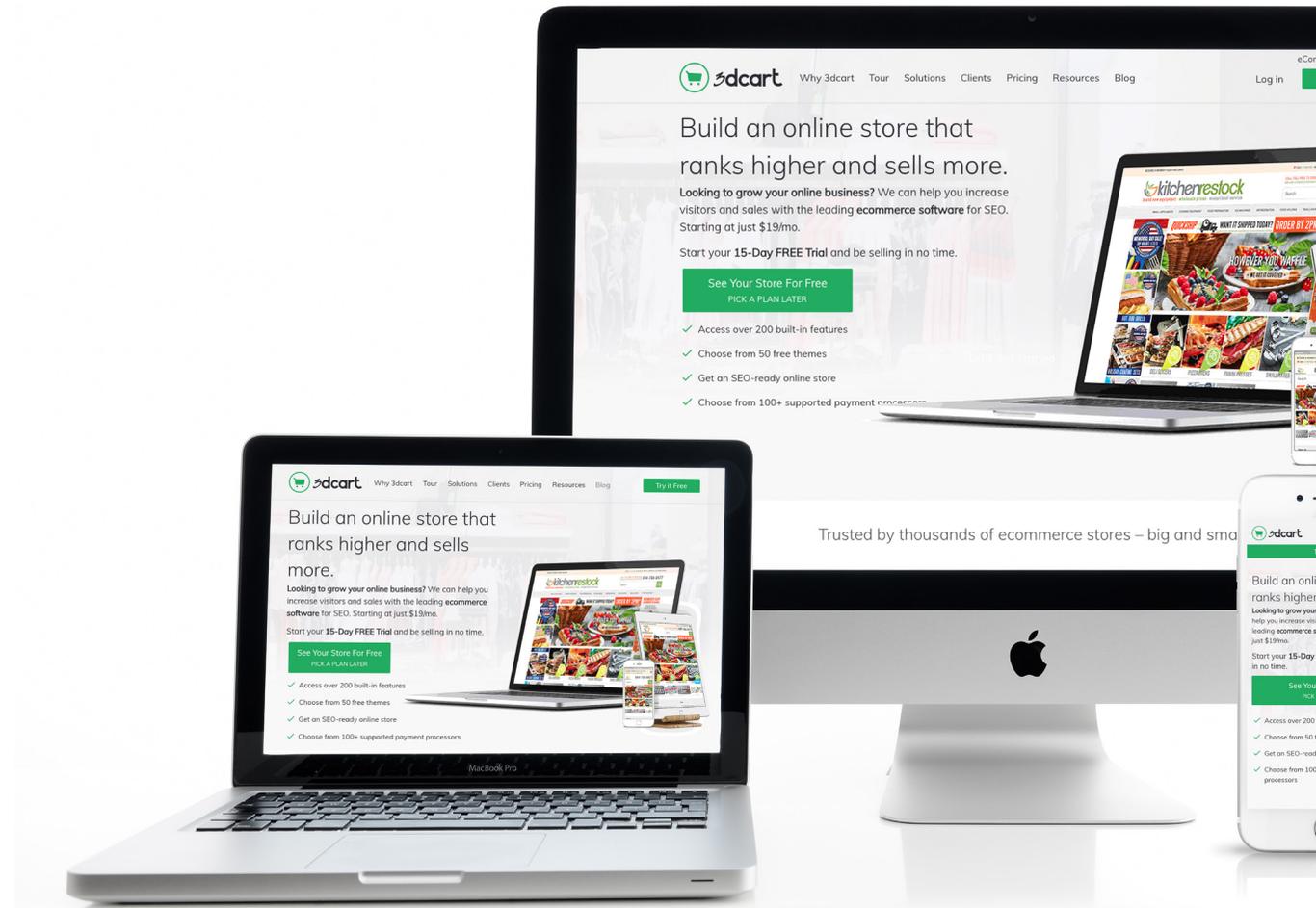


3dcart: Overview

Established in 1997 and now powering over 22,000 online stores, 3dcart could be a good fit if you're looking for an eCommerce platform that has stood the test of time.

In fact, as an all-in-one hosted solution, customers only pay a recurring monthly fee and in turn don't need to worry about things like website security, hosting or software updates, which can be a big plus for many only sellers.

Throughout this section, we look at a variety of key elements and talk you through the advantages and disadvantages of using 3dcart.



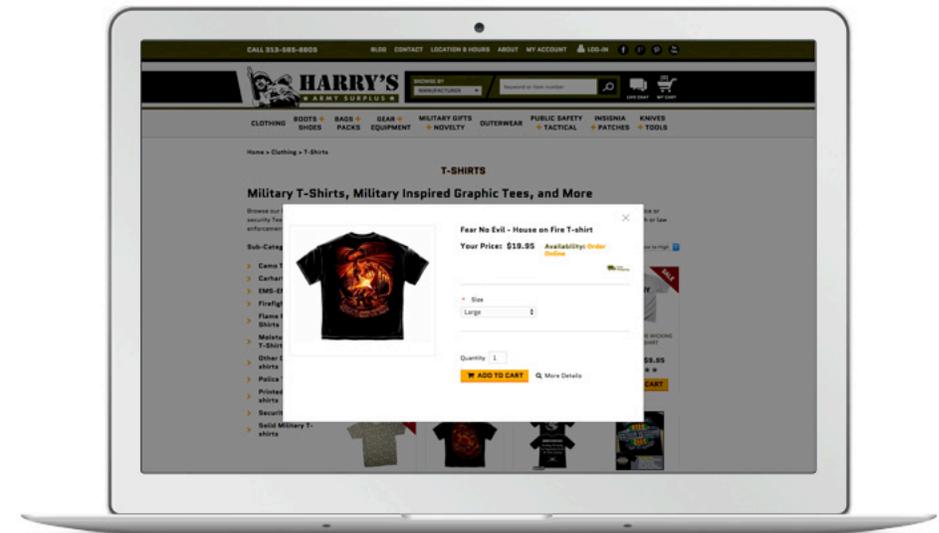


Ease of use

3dcart is relatively easy to understand and use, both in terms of setting up your store and maintaining it. In fact, it's not too dissimilar to the likes of Shopify or Volusion.

There are tutorial videos and an optional 3dcart wizard that can help you to set up your store, which is a big plus as this is not the case with many other eCommerce platforms.

In fact, 3dcart is arguably one of the easiest eCommerce platforms to get to grips with, with employees of all technical abilities able to make sense of the tutorials and documentation, and more importantly use it on a day-to-day basis without encountering difficulties.





Search Engine Optimisation

In terms of SEO, 3dcart has some of the most robust functionalities available to its users in comparison to many other all-in-one hosted solutions.

In 2015, the eCommerce platform made several updates to its SEO capabilities, which is something you may want to bear in mind when reading 3dcart reviews any earlier than this as they may no longer be fully up to date.

3dcart users can make use of a variety of in-built features that affect search ranking, from creating canonical URLs, creating your own meta tags, header tags, alt tags and page titles and an updated Google XML sitemap.

If you're comparing Shopify and 3dcart to support the growth of your online business, something worth

taking into consideration is that you will not get the same level of control over SEO functionalities that 3dcart users benefit from.

For example, you can edit some meta tags with 3dcart, but with Shopify the platform takes care of all meta tags for you. Even if your capability with SEO is fairly limited, being able to control your meta tags is one way to improve your search ranking.

However, 3dcart will automatically provide meta tags and titles to your product, category and manufacturer index pages. At the moment, 3dcart users cannot edit the title and meta tag information for these pages.

Instead, these pages will use your home page title and meta tag information.

3dcart also provides built-in support from schema.org, which helps search engines to determine what your website is about. You can also make use of a blog to optimise your website for keywords, which can help get your website to rank better in search engines.

The great thing about these 3dcart features is that all of these SEO functionalities are included in the monthly price and you're unlikely to need to purchase any additional functionalities.

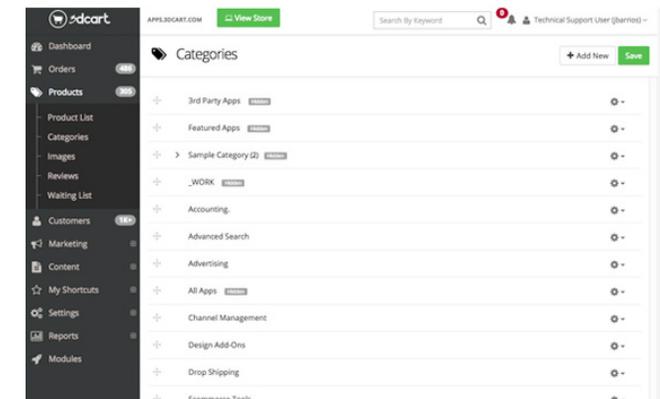


Additional Marketing Features

3dcart offers a variety of additional marketing features, but the number of extra functionalities you will enjoy depends on which monthly plan you choose.

Within the platform's cheapest two monthly packages - start-up plan and basic plan – customers enjoy the same number of marketing features. These include things like wish lists, free integration with MailChimp and AWeber (email marketing services), coupons and discounts to encourage more sales and an in-built blog.

If you wish to benefit from an abandoned cart saver or be able to send email marketing newsletters, this is only available with 3dcart's plus or pro monthly packages. Additionally, if you want to set up a reward loyalty programme, this is only available with the latter plan.





Design

With approximately 150 storefront themes – a mix of both premium and free templates – 3dcart offers a lot of variety for its users. With regards to cost, premium themes typically range from \$99 to \$199.

Do keep in mind that not all themes are fully responsive though, which is of paramount importance nowadays. That said, all themes can be customised if you have some knowledge about HTML and CSS and are comfortable doing so.

It's also worth noting that any website developers can apply to sell themes on the marketplace, however 3dcart does not endorse or guarantee the performance of these layouts.

3dcart does, however, provide an opportunity to buy a fully customised storefront layout according to your business needs. This will cost you a minimum of \$799, but as it is a purchase you're not going to want to make very often, it can be seen as an investment.

Finally, 3dcart has a RESTful API, which means that you can build your own store theme if you have web developer knowledge and the right skillset.





Customer Support

One of the biggest benefits to 3dcart is that it offers all customers 24-hour support, seven days a week within all its packages. This is one of the many reasons online sellers may choose to go with 3dcart.

That said, the type of support available to you will depend on the plan you choose. 3dcart customers on the start-up plan have access to online chat support and the platform's ticket support system only. However, you will also only be paying \$19 per month to use the platform.

If you go with the basic (\$29 per month) or plus plan, then you will also have access to 24/7 phone support. This is a really cool feature as when you compare eCommerce platforms, affordable and accessible customer support is often lacking.

According to reviews on Capterra, several online sellers have pointed out that 3dcart has great customer service and technical support.

In terms of issues, the general consensus of these reviews is that problems tend to be fixed within a few hours or less.





Online Resources and Community

The hosted eCommerce platform has 3dcart Experts section on its website, which provides a centralised location to find partners that know the ins and outs of 3dcart software, as well as those that can help with design, marketing and business development.

On top of this, 3dcart gives customers access to a knowledgebase, which goes into detail about how to get the best use out of 3dcart for their business and how to perform certain actions; in other words, it covers the bases of what a simple website needs to do in order to get it to work at minimal to average level.

3dcart also has its own version of an eCommerce university, which is a free resource to help the platform continue to grow its online community - much like Shopify and BigCommerce.

It offers lessons in article format, combining groups of these together to create written courses and webinars which detail everything from apps and integrations, 3dcart tutorials, marketing and search engine optimisation.





Extensions and integrations

The 3dcart marketplace gives users access to a variety of add-ons and service integrations to extend the functionality of an online store.

You will be still able to find an app or service integration in almost any topic you can think of; for example, within order management, advertising, shipping or tax.

Compared to other eCommerce platforms, the number of actual add-ons available is quite competitive, though not as great as Shopify or BigCommerce. However, it's worth bearing in mind that you may not need to use as many apps as you would with these other platforms.

It's also worth noting that not all add-ons are openly supported by 3dcart. This means you will need to do your own research when it comes to investigating the suitability of any apps that do not state that 3dcart supports them. The vetting process that these apps undergo is not clear to customers and reviews for each extension can be scarce at times.

3dcart also has a RESTful API, so that developers can build custom integrations or add-ons if the ones you see aren't the ones you want. Of course, this will be an extra cost to consider if you don't have a developer on your team. Unlike other more popular hosted platforms, however, API access is granted to users no matter what pricing plan they're on.



Pricing

As 3dcart is an all-in-one hosted solution, users pay a monthly recurring fee in exchange for being able to sell online.

Regardless of the plan you choose, 3dcart does not charge transaction fees and provides unlimited bandwidth support.

There are four packaged prices that will set you back between \$19-\$229 each month.

If you choose to pay annually, you will end up paying ten percent less than this, which you may want to consider if you already have an established customer base. 3dcart also offers tailored pricing and packages for enterprise business customers.





Start-up Plan

\$19.00

per month (VAT excluded)

3dcart's one-user start-up plan is ideal for those who are new to selling online, as it has a one hundred monthly order limit, at a total maximum of \$10K.

The platform also provides basic necessary functionality with 24/7 technical support, accessible through online chat and their ticket system.

Some standout features found in the 3dcart start-up plan include being able to provide product reviews on your website, as well as the ability to integrate Google customer reviews. These often come at an additional price with other eCommerce platforms.

Basic Plan

\$29.00

per month (VAT excluded)

An extra ten dollars each month enables you to sell as many products as you like on 3dcart's basic plan. This also supports up to two users at any one time and provides 24/7 phone support, as well as online chat and tickets. All additional features that users enjoy are the same as the platform's start-up monthly package.

Plus Plan

\$79.00

per month (VAT excluded)

3dcart's plus plan gives up to five users access to the system, with 24/7 technical support. The main difference between the previous plans include the ability to segment customers into groups to offer specific pricing, promotions and marketing.

3dcart Plus users can also make use of an abandoned cart saver, as well as their customer relationship management (CRM) database, which is key for building and maintaining strong relationships with your customers

Pro Plan

\$229.00

per month (VAT excluded)

3dcart's pro plan enables up to fifteen users access at any one time, with users enjoy priority technical support. Additional benefits include the ability to track sales, leads and commissions between your sales staff which is a plus if you have three or more sales representatives.

3dcart also enables you to send out autoresponder emails – automated emails sent to customers when specific actions are triggered on their orders. This can increase your business productivity tenfold.

In addition to the four packages listed above, 3dcart also offers tailored pricing for enterprises.

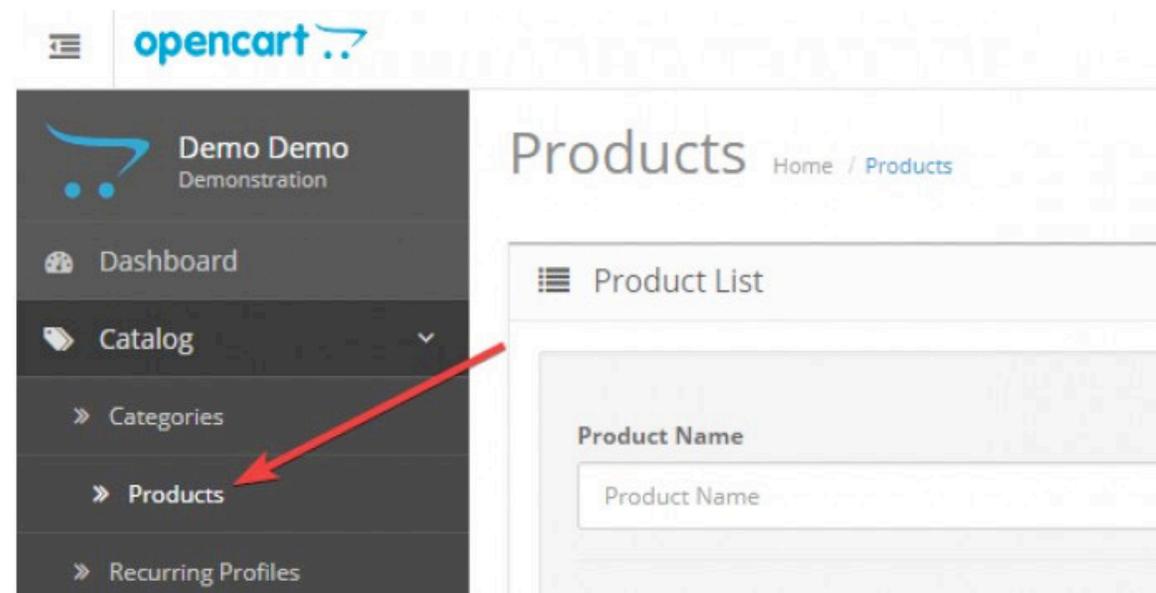


Scalability

Scaling with 3dcart is possible. In fact, one key benefit of 3dcart compared to other all-in-one solutions is that no additional transaction fees are charged at any point on any plan.

With exception of the start-up plan, each of 3dcart's plans also offer unlimited bandwidth and unlimited products, both of which are key for scaling a business.

While scaling through open source platform can be more cost-effective than scaling through packaged hosted solutions, with all the in-built SEO tools and other functionalities suitable for growing a business, 3dcart comes out well.





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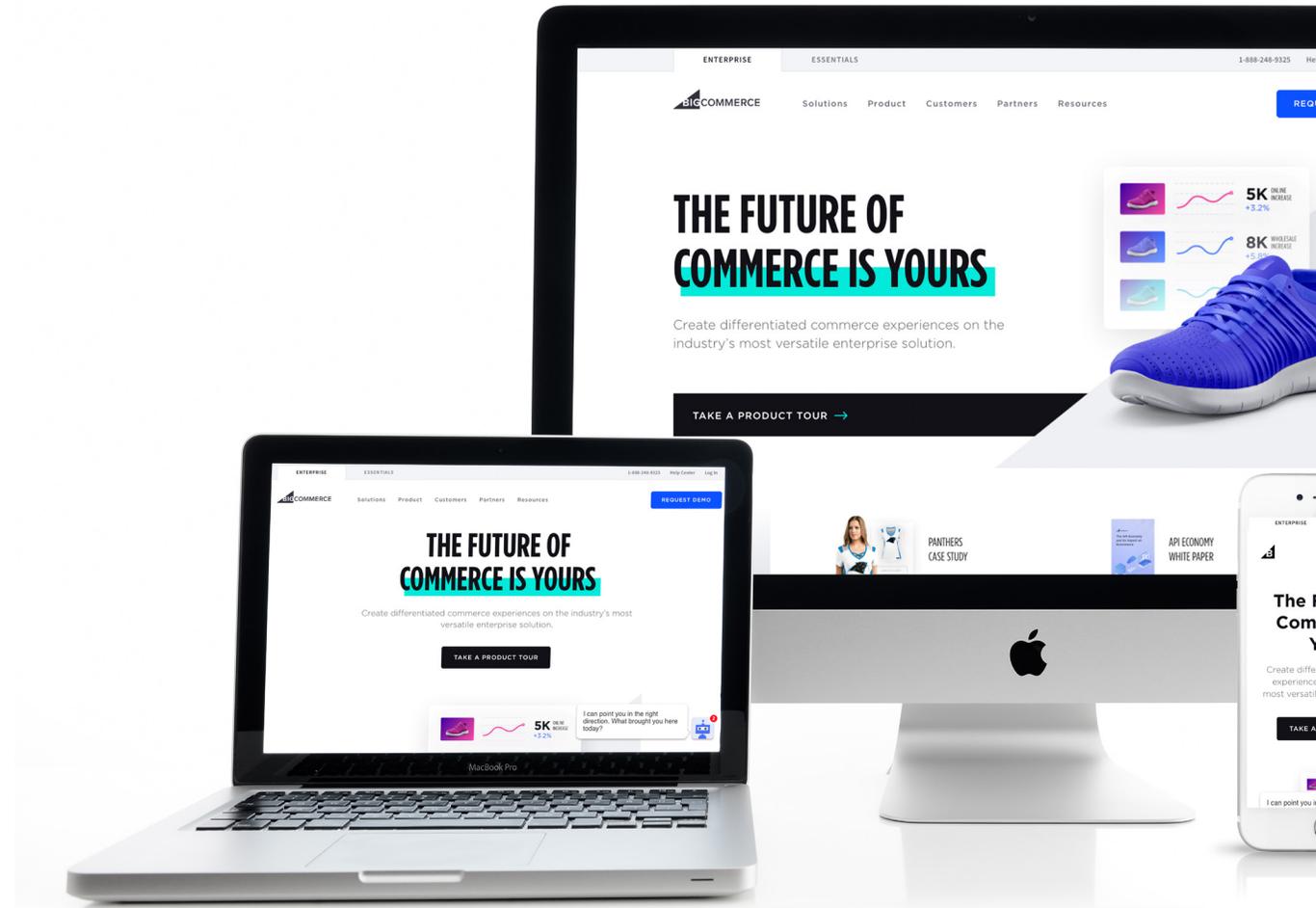


BigCommerce: Overview

After going through an extensive rebrand in 2016, BigCommerce is a serious contender on the market and has plenty to offer online merchants of all sizes.

First launched in 2009, BigCommerce now serves over 96,000 online merchants across the world. The platform's messaging is to power success for brands. For the team behind the solution, this goes beyond creating one of the leading eCommerce platforms.

Looking to compare BigCommerce with Shopify or other hosted solutions? In this BigCommerce review, we've weighed up the pros and cons of the eCommerce solution so that you can decide if it makes practical sense to build your business on.





Ease of use

If you're wanting to compare BigCommerce with other eCommerce platforms, it's worth noting that it sits somewhere in the middle between the simplicity of Shopify and the complexity of Magento.

As BigCommerce hosts your online business for you, it also takes the hassle out from having to make sure your business is security compliant, updating your software for you and resolving any bugs. Everything is stored and accessed online (or in the cloud).

Depending on your familiarity with eCommerce platforms, you may find that the way the BigCommerce backend is set up is a little overwhelming. There are lots of options and it may take you time to get used to.

With this in mind, if you're looking for a much simpler eCommerce platform, then Shopify may be a bit more up your street. That said, there are both advantages and disadvantages to doing this – the right solution depends entirely on your needs and capabilities.

Although BigCommerce is a hosted solution, it benefits from having an API with a RESTful architecture, which allows developers to code in the language of their choice. This is a clear advantage over Shopify, which uses its own Liquid code and requires developers to learn it.





Time to market

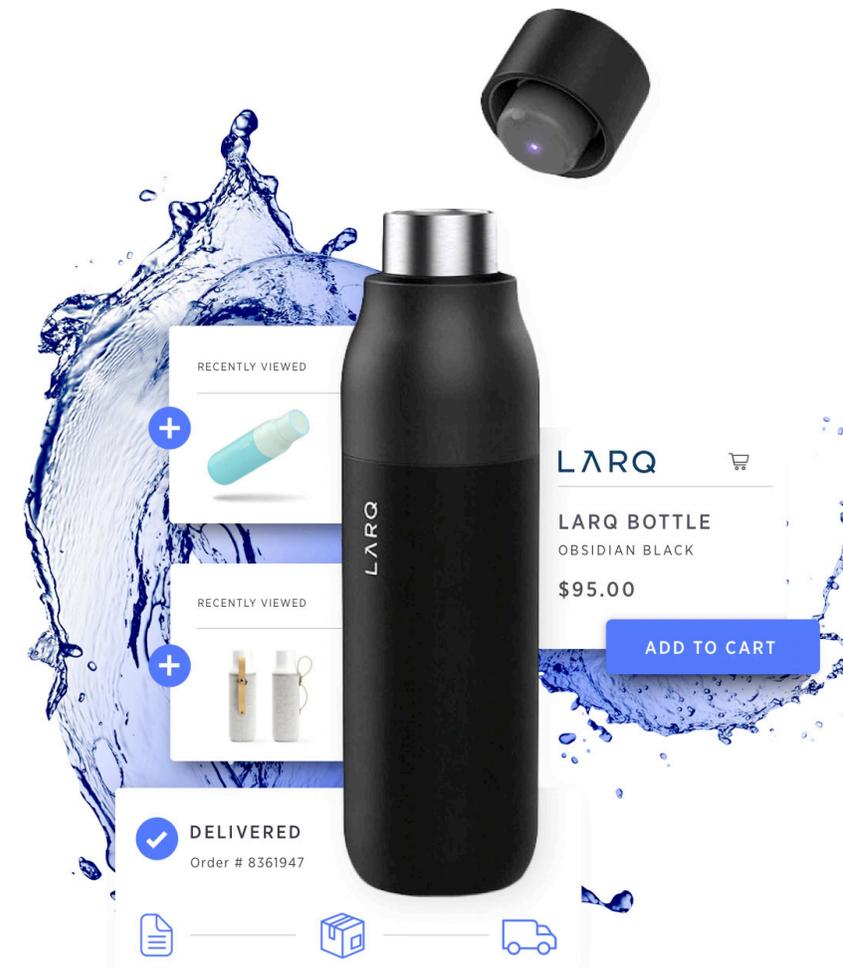
How quickly can you get BigCommerce up and running? This all depends on the size and scope of your online store as well as the level of customisation you're seeking.

As BigCommerce controls your hosting, updates and security, all you need to do to get an account up and running is sign up online. You don't need any technical know-how as you would with open source eCommerce platforms, as the boring bits are taken care of for you.

The number of products you have to upload onto your eCommerce platform will affect how quickly you can sell online. Take the time to get this done to the best of your ability from the off bat as this will likely minimise the time spent optimising each page.

For example, as a bedroom seller with a small selection of products, you'll find this won't take too much time at all. But, if you have hundreds (or even more) products to sell online then this could take a good week, if not longer.

On top of this, you'll want to ensure effort has gone into the look and feel of your online store to support your business and encourage sales as much as you can. If you choose a premade layout with minimal editing, this could be turned around in a day or less.





Search engine optimisation

Just like other hosted eCommerce platforms, such as 3dcart, BigCommerce offers the SEO fundamentals that are essential to make your store search engine friendly. These features include customised page titles, meta descriptions, product descriptions and image alt tags.

You can also edit your site's Robots.txt file, meaning that you can solve the problem of duplicate content and too much content on your website that you don't want to rank for. As well as this, you can change your URLs, create 301 redirects and URL rewrites.

In order to do this successfully, you'll need someone who understands the full extent of on-site and off-site SEO. For example, if "rel=next", "rel=previous" and the words no follow or do follow mean very little to you, it's unlikely you'll be able to fully optimise your BigCommerce shop without the help of someone with SEO knowledge and expertise.

If this sounds challenging or you don't have the resources to hire a professional, you may want to seek out an eCommerce platform that does most of this legwork for you.

For example, Shopify is a very simple solution that doesn't over-complicate SEO and does most of it for you. However, you're unlikely to get the same level of control over your website's SEO as you would get with BigCommerce. It all depends on what you need.

RECENT ORDERS



Men's Wingtip Boot

Color: Mahogany Sz: 10.5

\$112.33

VISA Checkout



Women's Leather Pump

Color: Natural Sz: 7

\$89.54

VISA





Additional marketing features

Despite having fewer marketing features than the likes of Shopify, BigCommerce does integrate with several leading marketing platforms, such as HubSpot, MailChimp and Infusionsoft. You can also integrate your BigCommerce store with social media selling on Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook.

All BigCommerce account plans benefit from reporting tools as well, so you can use real data to inform your marketing campaigns. However, it's likely that the more quickly you grow your online business, the more specific insights you're going to need.

In terms of boosting your marketing efforts, you'll most likely find the solution you're looking for in the BigCommerce marketplace. The majority of the apps here are to do with supporting your marketing activities.





Design

In terms of design, BigCommerce offers a mix of free and premium shopfront layouts to attract your site visitors. Paid shop templates available on the BigCommerce theme marketplace range from costing \$145-\$235 – a one-off cost in line with its competitors.

This is great news for businesses on a tight budget or for those considering selling online, as there is something suitable for all budgets and you don't need to have design experience to get a beautiful shop up and running.

There are two free shop layouts on offer for you to use too, known as Cornerstone and Fortune. Fortune comes in four colour variations, while Cornerstone comes in three. Both are modern-looking and fully responsive across devices.

The BigCommerce premium layouts available for purchase are also well-designed, pleasing to the eye and are appropriately modern. Again, the marketplace counts every layout colour variation as a new shop theme. In truth, there are approximately 30 individual paid themes.

You don't need to have design experience nor technical knowledge to customise your online store's appearance. The Stencil Theme Editor is a point-and-click interface that allows you to change how your store looks without having to enter code.

Using this editor, you can change colours, fonts, image sizes and upload your own logo. However, if you want more control over how your store looks, then you will need to be comfortable with HTML and CSS.



Extensions and integrations

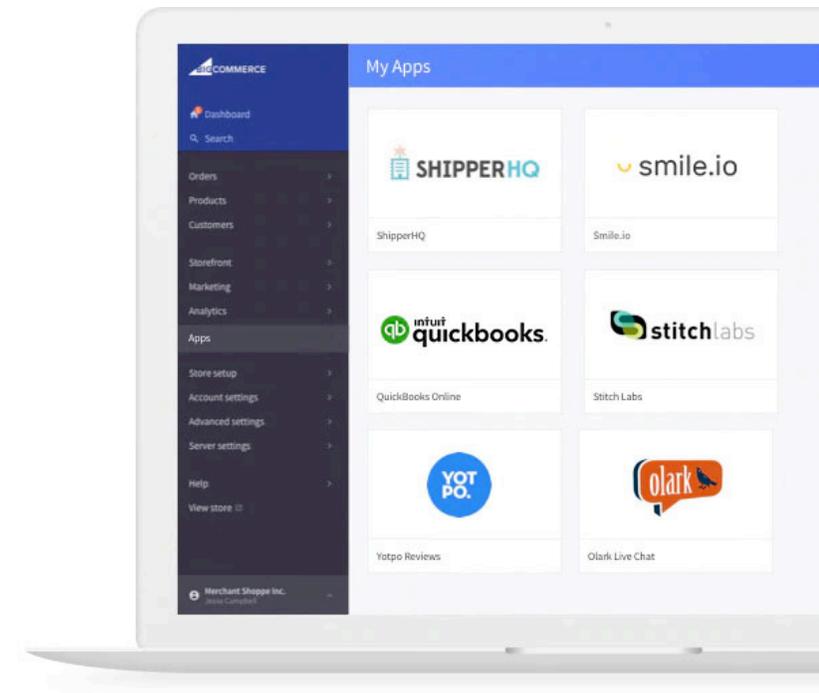
The BigCommerce marketplace currently has close to 600 paid and free integrations and add-ons available for its users to grow your eCommerce business. Some of these apps can be very expensive and may price you out of being able to afford BigCommerce.

The bulk of these extensions are to support your digital marketing efforts, but add-ons also include site tools, accounting and tax services, order management and shipping and fulfilment, as well as other areas to help grow your online business.

These can cost nothing to in the hundreds (if not more due to custom pricing options). Some have an upfront one-off cost, while others require monthly or annual recurring payments. We recommend using the free trial to see if these apps suit your needs before buying them.

To be clear, you don't need to have someone with technical knowledge on your team in order to install these apps or integrations successfully. As a hosted platform, BigCommerce sorts this out for you, without you needing to do much more than clicking buttons.

Many customer reviews on Capterra mention how happy they are with the variety of apps available to them as BigCommerce users finding many (if not all) of their needs met. However, others advise to be weary of the costs incurred as it can add up pretty quickly.





Customer support

The BigCommerce marketplace currently has close to 600 paid and free integrations and add-ons available for its users to grow your eCommerce business. Some of these apps can be very expensive and may price you out of being able to afford BigCommerce.

In terms of customer support, BigCommerce offers three methods for a user to get in touch with a member of the customer service team. It offers 24/7 direct customer support through phone, email and also has a live chat feature available on its website.

24/7 round the clock customer support can be beneficial to have access to, especially if you don't have much technical knowledge on your team. If you run into a problem you need fixing right there and then, accessible customer support can really help.

At the same time, if you don't understand something and don't have the time to trawl through the internet, accessible customer support that you can ring right there and then can also save you so much time and money when trying to run your business.

BigCommerce's customer support isn't just accessible, according to a number of reviews on Capterra, customer support is helpful and responsive.

It seems that when you reach a certain size and scope, you may also outgrow the knowledge of the platform's customer service team. In order to get the support and technical knowledge that you need, it

may make more sense to hire your own developer(s). That said, do remember that people are more prone to express problems rather than praise.

That said, BigCommerce does provide a wide range of videos, guides and documentation to support you in your eCommerce journey, but we'll get on to this later on within this BigCommerce review.



Online resources and community

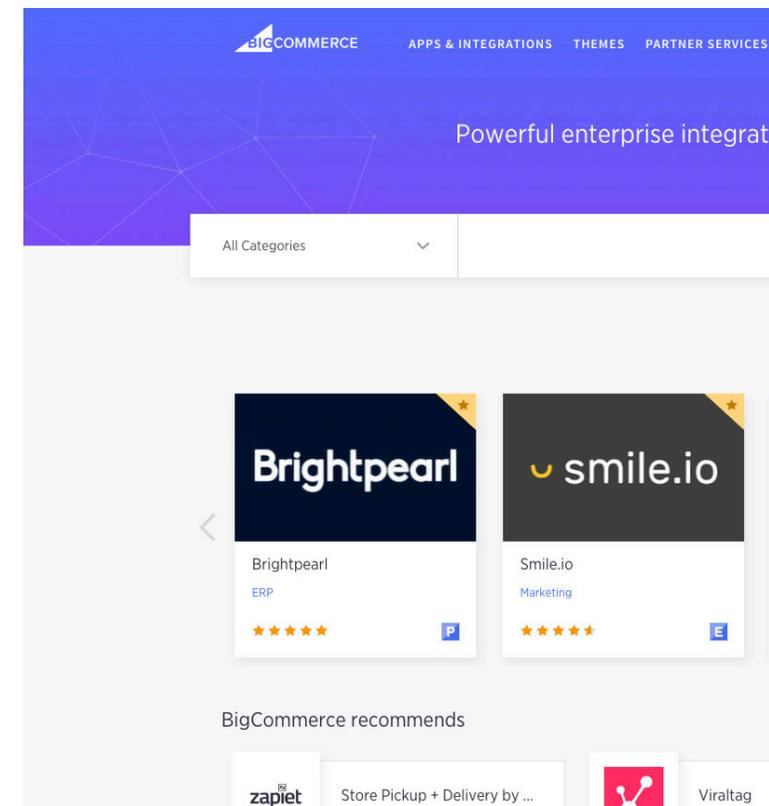
BigCommerce has a pretty extensive list of resources to help grow your business through the hosted solution, which arguably rivals Shopify when drawing comparisons between eCommerce platforms.

In fact, BigCommerce provides video tutorials for launching your online store, managing it and growing it. What isn't answerable through video tutorials is likely to be found in the platform's documentation.

If you have a developer on your team or can afford to outsource (if you want to get the most out of BigCommerce you will eventually need to consider this) then there is specific developer documentation to support them in learning the ins and outs of BigCommerce.

Community forum wise, there's a Q&A forum for developers which is active with posts, but less so in terms of replies and views, which isn't particularly helpful. That said, BigCommerce staff are active there and the replies, though few, are helpful.

There's also a general BigCommerce users Q&A which is active, and most posts contain useful responses, so this could be a good place to start if you have a self-starting attitude and like to learn how to do things for yourself. You don't need technical knowledge to a certain point, so providing support is on hand when you need it, you're all set.





Pricing

BigCommerce offers three plans with different pricing tiers. The solution also offers enterprise-level pricing, but pricing for this is unavailable and is likely to be tailored to how successful or profitable your online business is.

The three plans on offer are known as: BigCommerce Standard, BigCommerce Plus and BigCommerce Pro. All BigCommerce plans have no transaction fees, SSL security certificate, unlimited staff accounts and unlimited products, file storage and bandwidth.

The biggest differentiators between these plans include product features, access to specific data and the total online sales you can make per year. If you're comparing BigCommerce with the likes of Shopify, then two advantages to BigCommerce is that it does not limit your business based on the number of user accounts you may need and doesn't charge you transaction fees per order.





Standard Plan

\$29.95

per month

The BigCommerce Standard plan gets you a branded online store, the ability to sell through social media and all the basic necessities for selling online. For example, a one-page checkout, site security, discount codes and reporting tools.

In terms of customer support, you will have access to a 24/7 live chat agent. If you want any further functionality for your online store then you'll be looking at the BigCommerce marketplace for solutions, or you can hire your own developer to create more integrations.

Within this plan, you can make up to \$50,000 in sales on a yearly basis. If you go beyond this level, then you'll need to consider switching to a different plan.

Plus Plan

\$79.00

per month

As a BigCommerce Plus Plan customer, you will receive the same features and benefits as standard users. You'll also be able to make use of customer groups and segmentation to make your marketing and sales efforts more targeted and effective.

It's worth mentioning that there are eCommerce platforms that enable you to segment your customers for less money. For example, Shopify and LemonStand both provide this (almost essential) functionality in the cheapest monthly plans available for their users.

BigCommerce Plus users will also be able to make use of an abandoned cart saver and stored credit cards, both of which can contribute to turning lost sales into actual sales. Once again, however, these features can be found for less money with other hosted solutions.

Within this plan, you can make up to \$150,000 in sales on a yearly basis. If you go beyond this amount, you'll need to investigate the BigCommerce Pro plan.

Pro Plan

\$249.95

per month

In comparison to the former two plans, the BigCommerce Pro plan is quite the jump in price.

The three additional features in the BigCommerce Pro plan include Google customer reviews, faceted search (allowing your customers to shop by applying product filters) and being able to use your own SSL security certificate.

Within this monthly plan, BigCommerce Pro users can make up to \$400,000 a year in sales – if you make more than this then you'll need to speak to BigCommerce directly about its enterprise-level pricing.



Scalability

Is BigCommerce scalable? In short, yes. All accounts benefit from unlimited user accounts, unlimited products and unlimited file storage and bandwidth, which sets you up well for scaling. You'll need to progress through the tiered pricing plans as you scale.

A key aspect surrounding scalability is the ability to access big data. This is fundamental to scale a business successfully so that you can analyse and evolve your marketing campaigns, determine return on investment and understand your conversion rates and return rates.

BigCommerce provides you with a reporting dashboard from the word go. This covers several different analytical elements, including an overview, abandoned carts, customers, orders, marketing, merchandising, purchase funnel and more.

The eCommerce platform also provides eCommerce insights to improve your conversion rates – for all plans, this is a monthly recurring fee of \$49. You could buy it for one month, see what data it gets you and record if your business grows as a result of changes you make.

Uptime and site speed can also affect your ability to scale successfully. Fortunately, BigCommerce performs well in both of these areas. In fact, a growing number of customers are leaving positive reviews mentioning uptime and speed on a variety of review platforms.

Given all the features the platform comes with – and the variety of add-ons to extend the functionality of your online store and enhance your business – BigCommerce is a scalable and affordable eCommerce platform.



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EKM: Overview

EKM is a hosted all-in-one solution, which means that it includes many of the key features needed to sell online for a monthly fee.

If you're just starting to compare eCommerce platforms, EKM and Shopify are surprisingly similar on first look. Although a smaller name within the industry, EKM has a lot of the same functionalities for a price not too different from the big players. What makes EKM attractive to many UK online sellers comparing eCommerce platforms is that it is the only solution that is 100% based in Britain.

On top of this, EKM has a score of 9/10 on TrustPilot, with hundreds of satisfied customers leaving reviews on a regular basis. But that doesn't mean EKM is without its limitations. This article puts the spotlight on the UK's first cloud-based eCommerce platform so that you can decide whether or not it's a good fit for your business and your needs.





Ease of use

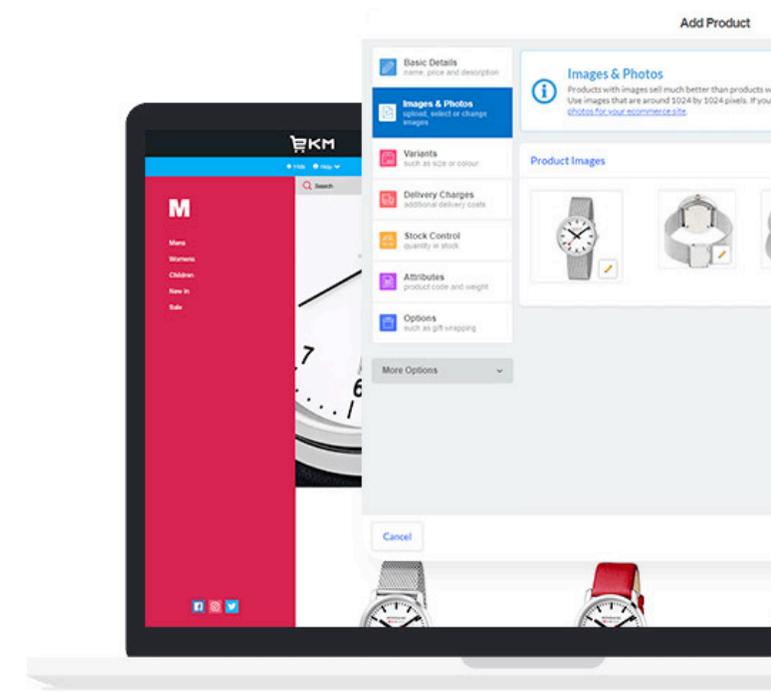
EKM is an eCommerce platform specifically built for small businesses who don't have the resources to deal with the technical side of web development, meaning that the solution is really easy to use and maintain.

EKM is easily comparable to Shopify, with the main difference between the two being the design of the software.

Once you have signed up, the EKM dashboard will greet you with a Get Started guide to help you understand where key elements of the platform can be found and what they do – great for businesses without technical knowledge.

If you sell on marketplaces or plan to sell on marketplaces, then keep in mind that EKM does not provide simple integrations to allow you to manage these orders through the eCommerce platform. You would need to make use of an effective inventory management solution to support you with this.

If you want to customise your store, you'll need to add features, many of which are free and installed through the click of a button, reportedly under two minutes.

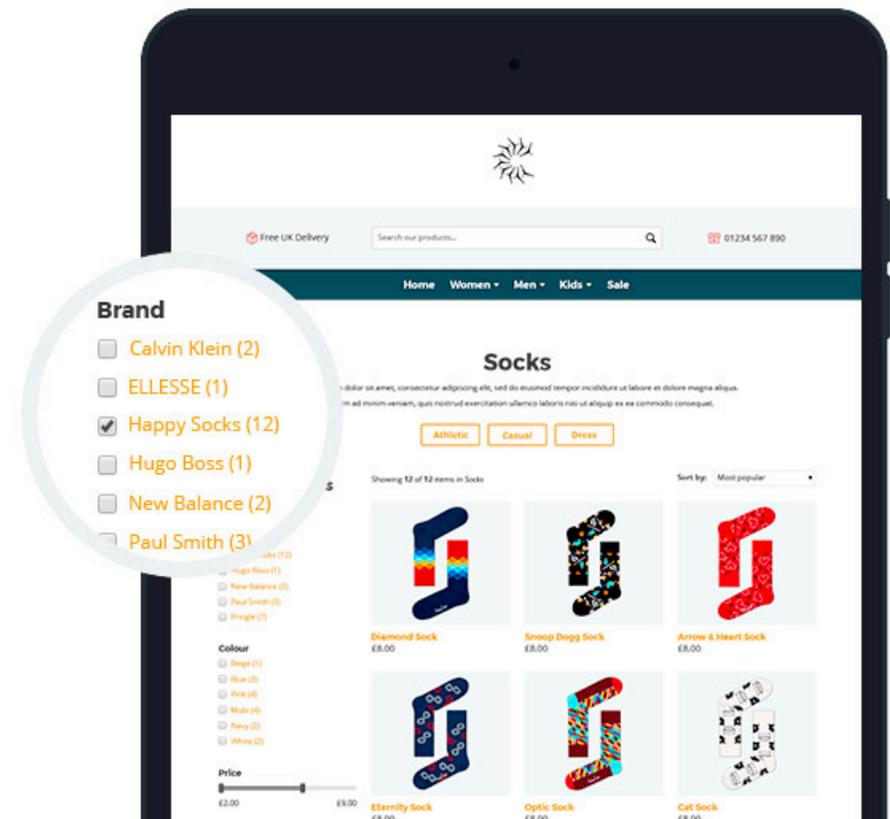




Time to market

Depending on the size and scope of your online store, with EKM you could potentially have your shop set up and ready to sell within a matter of hours. This is good news for new sellers who need to cover business costs right away.

That said, we recommend that you spend longer on implementation than this if you can, as the more insight you can gather from your customers through market research, the more likely you are to create an effective online store from the get-go.





Search engine optimisation

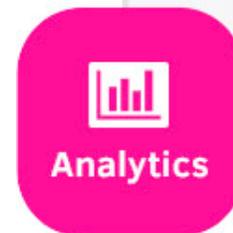
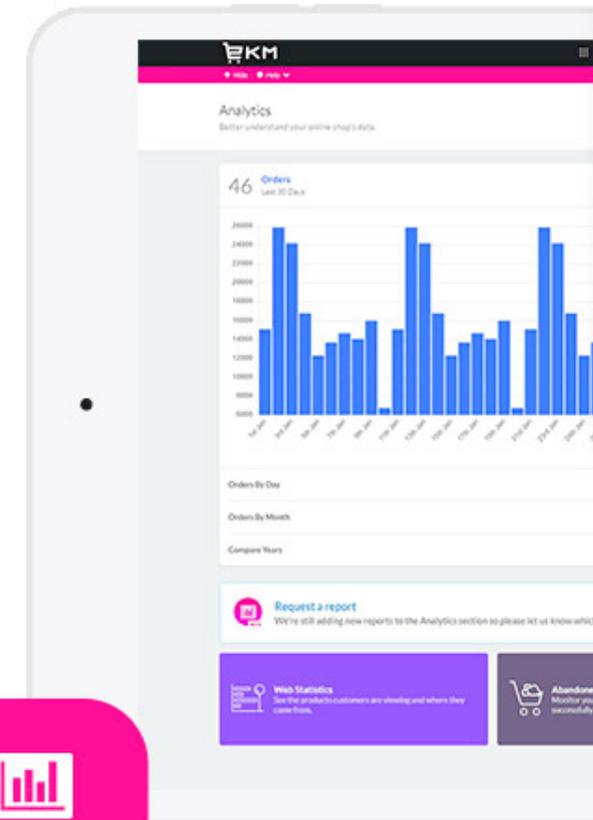
EKM makes the process of optimising your website for search engines simple, which means you don't need to be a technical wizard to enjoy the benefits.

All themes are fully responsive across multiple devices and you can create your own page titles, enter meta keywords and control the meta descriptions for each page in a user-friendly product interface.

The eCommerce platform removes a big chunk of the SEO legwork for you. For example, EKM's software will identify your image ALT tags automatically, which can save you time when uploading new products and means you don't need to worry about one extra thing.

However, some online sellers prefer to have full control over these elements. As you can't optimise every element for search engines, you need to trust the platform will identify the correct information for you.

According to TrustPilot customer reviews, many EKM users appreciate the fact that there are SEO features built into the platform as it makes running a business easier. Some reviewers also mention that they have been able to improve their search rankings thanks to their account manager – an extra benefit given to all new users for a limited time.





Additional marketing features

What's great about EKM is that it comes with plenty of tools to help you market and promote your online store without needing to spend money on add-ons or extensions.

They also make the process of tracking your performance easy, with a built-on reporting feature and the ability to integrate with Google Analytics. Another feature EKM gives its users is the ability to control many aspects of email marketing from inside the platform. EKM also provides store owners with the ability to integrate with major social media networks, including Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and Pinterest. You can also use Facebook Messenger to as a point of contact with your customers on your shop.

It's also worth mentioning that as you are given an account manager at the beginning of your journey with EKM, you can quiz these employees with any questions you may have.

However, just because there are more functionalities than the likes of BigCommerce or Volusion, it doesn't mean that you will have more success from the off bat, just that you are equipped with more tools than some other eCommerce platforms give users.

That said, the number of built-in features may make managing your business on a daily basis a lot more efficient, as you don't need to keep switching between programmes or software, or pay more, unlike other hosted eCommerce platforms.

A disadvantage to EKM is that there is only a small list of approved third-party marketing services available

for integration with your online shop. For example, there's no integration with MailChimp, which is pretty unusual for an eCommerce platform.

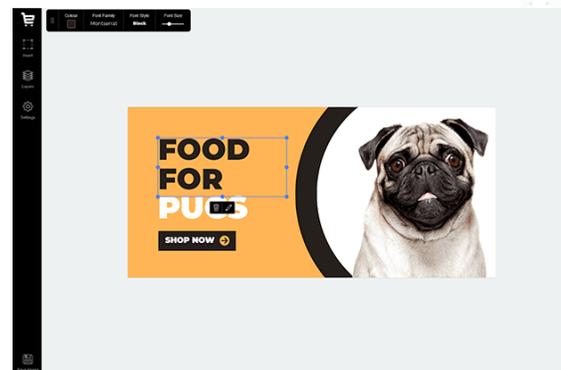
If EKM are serious about keeping up with the competition, then this is an area that the platform falls behind in. If you already make use of some external marketing applications, you will need to keep this in mind when comparing eCommerce platforms. However, if you're looking for an eCommerce platform that offers a ton of built-in functionalities to make managing your marketing efforts a simpler process, then EKM may be the solution for you.



Design

EKM has approximately sixty free storefront themes to choose from. These are all fully responsive across devices and are modern and clean in terms of appearance, fitting in with a variety of industries.

These themes are customisable in EKM's website builder, which means you don't have to know code to be able to edit how your store looks, but you are limited in what you can achieve. If you want much more control than being able to change the colours and fonts on your website, then it is possible, but you will need good working knowledge of HTML and CSS.





Extensions and integrations

There is no EKM marketplace with extensions or plugins that you can buy to boost the functionality of your online store. It seems that the idea behind EKM is that there are so many features added regularly that you won't need to buy add-ons.

This can be seen as both a good and bad thing. Good, as it is likely to save you money and is less likely to impact the speed of your store, but bad as if there is a feature you need that most other sellers do not, then it is unlikely to be made available any time soon.

What's more, there is only a small number of approved third-party services available to integrate with. However, if you have access to a developer or programmer then you can create your own integrations, although this is likely to be quite a time-consuming process.

Bulk Actions		Show			
Channel	Account	Order ID / Product Information	Total	Actions	
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<input type="checkbox"/>	Supplements Direct	202-1943942 Sci Mx RipedCore 90 Caps	£22.99		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Supps4you	202-1943942 Primeval Tri Sarm	£42.99		
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<input type="checkbox"/>	Supps4you	202-1943939 Primeval Tri Sarm	£42.99		
<input type="checkbox"/>	Supp Direct Amazon	202-1943938 Jack3D Pre Workout	£26.99		



Pricing

Much like other hosted eCommerce platforms, EKM has a tiered pricing structure that ranges from approximately £30 to £500 per month, excluding VAT. You also have the safety net of a six-month money back guarantee and there is no minimum contract length.

Something unique to EKM in comparison to other eCommerce platforms is that it offers an evolution mode within each plan. When you activate this mode, the EKM team will assess your website and send you a list of possible improvements.

You then have 30 days to decide if you want to approve these changes. If you want to go ahead, EKM will implement these changes without you needing to do anything, free of charge.

It can be beneficial to have a second pair of eyes scan over your website, particularly if you don't have much knowledge around web design and development as the EKM team will be basing their recommendations on previous customer successes.

We would, however, recommend that you are cautious if anything radical is suggested without good reason, such as changing your logo. Keep in mind the evolution team don't know your customer base, nor do they have access to any of your market research.





Start-up Plan

\$29.99

per month (excluding VAT)

EKM's start-up package includes all essential features, of which there is a pretty huge variety and this range is available in every plan, no matter the price you pay.

If you're comparing eCommerce platforms, most solutions will have monthly packages that rise in price to match the features being added to each pricing tier, so this is a nice selling point for online sellers considering EKM to build their business from the ground up.

However, you will only be able to have one user account associated with EKM's start-up plan. If you need multiple staff to access the platform at the same time, then this is where you'll start to run into problems with EKM.

Plus Plan

\$59.00

per month (excluding VAT)

EKM's growing plan supports up to five individual account users and provides access to the platform's full analytics. You'll also be assigned an account manager for six months and you can use EKM's evolution mode a maximum of four times a year.

As an EKM growing plan customer, you are able to make up to £150k in online sales per year and also have priority given when it comes to customer support.

Pro Plan

\$179.99

per month (excluding VAT)

A big step up in price, EKM's established plan is ideal for businesses who have a loyal and active customer base and are scaling quickly. Your website will be put on a separate server for better site performance and you can have up to 15 user accounts.

However, it's worth keeping in mind that when you make over £1m in online sales a year, you'll have to upgrade your plan to EKM pro, which starts at £499.99.

As an Established EKM customer, you will be assigned your own eCommerce consultant permanently and be able to use evolution mode as much as you want. Unlike the other two EKM account plans, Established Plan users can access emergency support 24/7.



Scalability

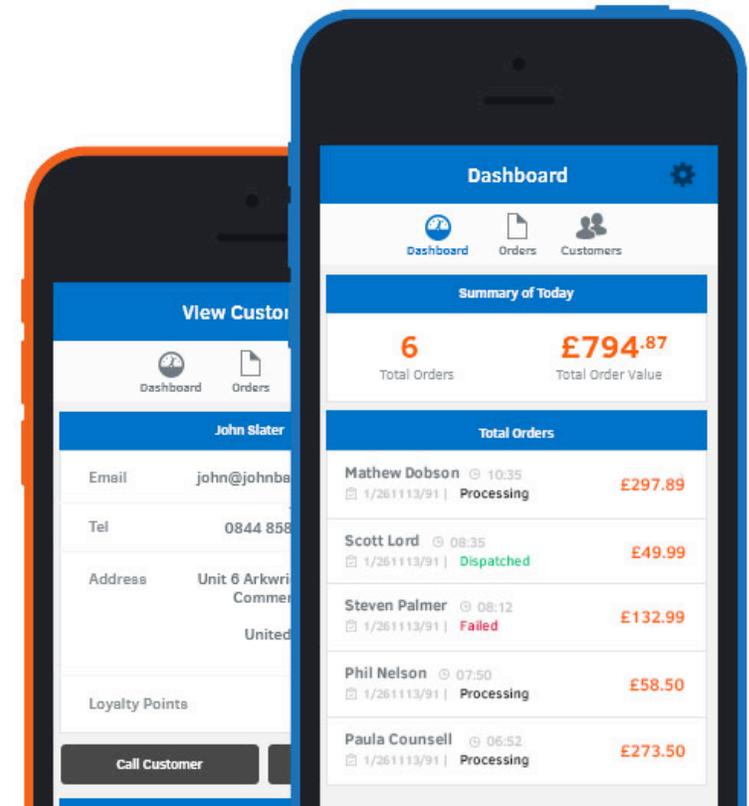
One key problem faced by online sellers as they scale is ensuring site speed and performance – EKM provides a VPS (Virtual Private Server) solution for customers to help combat this.

However, this is only available for the monthly cost of £179.99, which is a pretty steep cost to factor in; however, according to a Tamebay interview with EKM's Head of Marketing, typically by the time you'll need to upgrade your website to this you'll be turning over several hundred thousand.

EKM is definitely scalable to a certain point. It's really suited to supporting new online sellers with very little experience and developing them into successful and sustainable medium-level businesses.

But, if you plan to scale beyond this level, then you may find EKM isn't the most cost-effective solution and this may hinder your ability to grow further.

Instead, you may be better off with an open source solution – but you will need to consider other factors, such as whether or not you have the resources to cope with a more technical solution.





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Magento: Overview

Magento is the one of the most popular eCommerce platforms across the globe. And for good reason. With such a high level of flexibility and customisability, it is often seen as one of the most robust – but also most complex – open source solutions out there.

Formed in 2008, Magento benefits from a large community of over 300,000 developers and thousands of pre-built extensions. Plus, with full control over your website and data, Magento is an attractive prospect for those with technical expertise and a sizeable budget.

This Magento review shines a spotlight on Magento and its free open source edition, Magento Community Edition. For sake of clarity, this Magento review will not look at Magento Enterprise, which can set you back tens of thousands of pounds each year.





Ease of use

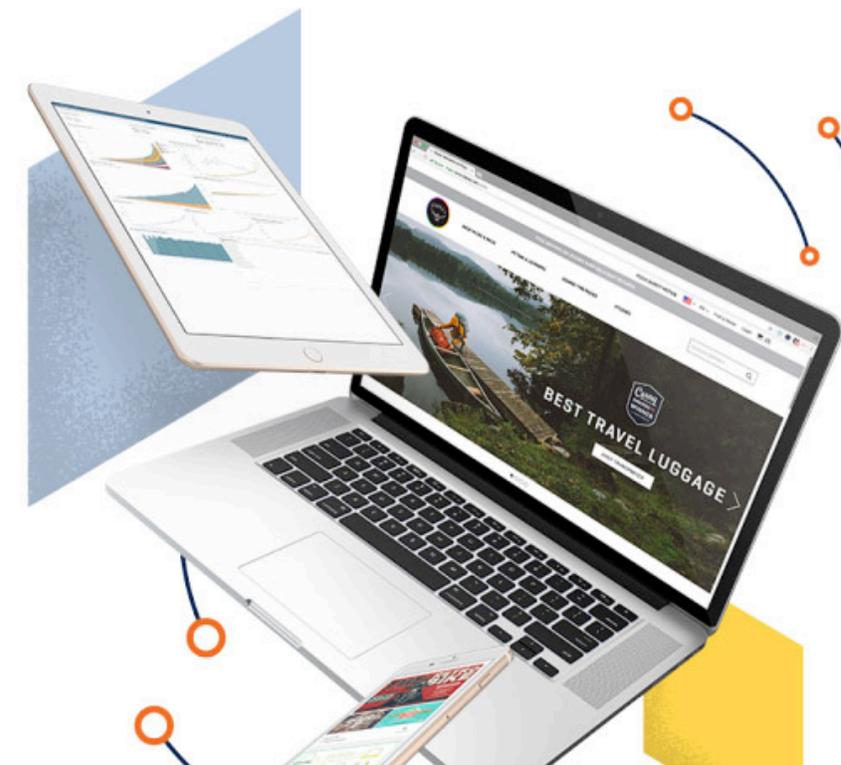
Magento Community Edition is free to download and use, which means you will have the responsibility of sorting out your server/hosting, registering your domain name, sorting your site's security certificate and making sure the software is up-to-date and bug-free.

This is something only fairly tech-savvy people will be able to do. If you don't have sufficient technical knowledge, then you may be better off with a fully managed solution such as Shopify or BigCommerce.

Even Magento itself does not recommend it as a suitable option for new businesses or those with limited technical expertise. Instead, they actively suggest checking out Zoey Commerce which is a fully hosted solution that was built with Magento at its core.

If you still want to go ahead with Magento to build and scale your online business, then we recommend hiring a freelancer or agency to help you with the set-up. Admittedly, this can set you back thousands of pounds and so may not be a viable alternative.

That said, once Magento is all set up it becomes significantly easier to use and manage.





Time to market

If you're looking for an eCommerce platform that you can set up within a day – or even a weekend – then Magento is not going to be the solution for you. At least not right now.

Magento is a highly complex eCommerce platform and it needs to be treated as such. Even for a developer or programmer with experience and knowledge, it can still be a pretty steep learning curve to get the most out of the solution for your business.

It's difficult to say how long a Magento project is likely to take, as it completely depends on the size and scope of your online store, the level of customisation you're seeking and the number of extensions you want.

If you outsource the development of your Magento store then it's also quite likely that your time to market will be longer than if you were to employ an in-house developer; however, this is still likely to take a good few months.

That said, if you don't require much customisation, plan to use a premade theme and are only looking to sell a few products to begin, then it's conceivable that your store could be set up by a developer in less than a month; but you may also find you'd be better off with a selling platform more accommodating to your needs.





Search engine optimisation

Magento is often held up as a shining example of one of the best eCommerce platforms for search engine optimisation. This is because you have full control over everything within the system, which means you can set things as you like.

However, it's important to understand that unless you're an SEO wizard and you have a decent amount of programming knowledge, you're probably not going to have an online shop that is well-optimised for search engines if you use Magento.

Magento gives you the ability to change default settings and customise the site fully, but it doesn't come with in-built SEO features, so you're going to need to either have the right resources and knowledge on your team, or you'll need to look beyond Magento.

So, what can you change if you have the knowledge or resources?

As a Magento user, you're able to fully customise your online shop's SEO functionality. For example, you can change default meta tags and restrict search engines from indexing pages you don't want to rank for.

If you have limited knowledge of programming and SEO functionalities, be aware you'll need to change the robots .txt file and meta robot directives so that site indexing from search engines is switched on. If you don't, your site won't get indexed and it won't rank in Google.

Sorting out SEO functionalities can become a big hassle to those without the right resources and it may be better to go with an all-in-one solution that can address these needs for you.



Additional marketing features

If you can wrap your head around how to set up Magento for your business, then you will benefit from a number of marketing features to help you sell more products. Several of these are already built-in and so are fairly simple to start using for your business.

For example, in Magento you have the ability to offer discounts or free shipping on your own terms. You can choose who you give discounts to by segmenting your customers – an effective feature that you pay for with the likes of BigCommerce or 3dcart. You can also offer discounts for customers who want to buy a sizeable quantity of your products, which makes it an ideal platform for B2B or wholesale companies.

Finally, you're able to create email newsletters to send to your customers. If you understand HTML then you can create your own custom email templates, or you can integrate Magento with the likes of MailChimp if you're not a big coding wizard.

But, just as with most eCommerce platforms, there are limitations to what comes as a built-in feature. For example, you may be surprised to learn that there's no blog provided in Magento's core functionality.

If a blog is essential to your business – and let's face it, it's pretty much a core component for every online business these days – then you can make use of a blog extension found in Magento's marketplace or integrate it with a platform like WordPress. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches.

There's also no built-in loyalty programmes or reward system in Magento. Again, however, you'll find a plethora of such extensions to extend the functionality of your Magento store in the marketplace.

Something to keep in mind is that most of these extensions aren't free, so if you're looking to keep your costs down and don't have sufficient programming knowledge on your team, Magento may not be the best eCommerce platform to lift up your business.



Design

At the risk of sounding like we're repeating ourselves, one of the main reasons business owners choose Magento is due to its high level of customisation, and front-end website design is one key aspect of this.

As such, there are only around 15 premade themes (free and premium) available for Magento users from the eCommerce platform's own marketplace. Much of this is because there are so many third-party web developers creating and selling their own themes.

For example, you'll find several solid, modern and responsive Magento storefront themes available on the likes of ThemeForest, or you can use your own developer to create something completely custom and unique to your business, but you'll need to factor this into your overall budget.

Magento was never designed for small businesses with limited resources and knowledge. It was designed for those that either have the time and drive to learn, plan to scale quickly or those that want to take their established business to the next level.

If you do decide to use a third-party storefront theme, then remember to check out reviews and do your research on the developer. The last thing you want to happen is for there to be a bug in the code and it affect your ability to sell online.





Extensions and integrations

As Magento is one of the more popular open source eCommerce platforms, there are thousands of integrations available in the Magento marketplace. What's more, over two thousand extensions are now compatible with Magento 2.

This is great news for new businesses setting up or switching to Magento, as the variety means that you'll be likely to find the exact custom functionalities you're looking for. Plus, you won't need to factor in time or money to create them which can cut down your costs.

Many of these Magento integrations are available free of charge, although you'll still need to pay to use any software that you do integrate with.

What's more, you can be sure any extensions you do use will be of assured quality. All extensions and updates go through an Extension Quality Program. This ensures each add-on has a logical and efficient coding structure, acceptable performance and scalability and is compatible with the Magento core.





Customer support

As Magento is an open source platform, it provides very little in the way of customer support.

If you do decide to use the eCommerce platform, then you will need easy access to an experienced programmer or developer to help you resolve any issues or bugs due to the complex nature of Magento in comparison with other eCommerce platforms.

That said, if you do have programming knowledge and a self-starter attitude, then Magento provides plenty of helpful resources on its website. However, the language used is extremely technical and the documentation is pretty heavy-going, even for those with sufficient knowledge.

Other than these resources, you're left to look around in the community forums to solve any issues that you may be having. This can be frustrating and time-consuming as you or your team try to figure out how to resolve any bugs or fix other issues.





Online resources & community

What Magento lacks in customer support, it makes up for in online community. The eCommerce platform is known for its active community forums and can be a great source of unbiased and helpful information.

What's more, because Magento is such a popular eCommerce platform, there are plenty of independent blogs and websites maintained by individuals to help you get the most out of the eCommerce platform.

For example, if you've come across Practical eCommerce then you'll know that a large chunk of its content is based on posts about Magento. If you're new to Magento, then check out Tutorial Magento as it provides a lot of video tutorials for beginners.

You can also read Magento's own blog which is filled with news, tips and advice to maximise your online business through the platform. The point is, Magento is so widely used that access to free online resources is pretty abundant – providing you understand tech speak and know how to code or have the resources to hire a professional.





Pricing

The Magento Community Edition is free to download and use for all. But what this doesn't mean is that it's not going to cost you anything. In fact, the budget you plan to spend on a Magento store will vary on the following key factors:

- Hosting and support services
- How customised you want your store to be
- If you source an in-house developer, through an agency or choose a freelancer
- The theme you use and the extensions you add

Every project is different. Depending on the size and scope of your online store, hosting is an ongoing monthly cost and is likely to set you back anywhere between £15 and £100 depending on the size of your site – but your web developer should be able to do this as part of your package.

The biggest cost factor is in fact the sourcing of a web developer to build and maintain your online store. Although this will change depending on the experience of the developer and the size of the project, set up is likely to cost you within the thousands, if not tens of thousands, while maintenance will be an ongoing cost as and when you need.

It's also worth keeping in mind that it generally works out cheaper to have your own in-house developer to build and maintain your Magento store. Due to its complexity, fixing bugs or errors can be difficult and time-consuming and programming knowledge is needed.

Where costs really start adding up is through the extensions you add to your store to develop its core functionality. These are usually ongoing costs to factor into your budget, rather than one-off costs, which is why it can be a good idea to have an in-house developer to create any integrations and custom extensions for your business.



Scalability

The flexibility and scalability of Magento are two of the main reasons why online businesses make the switch to the open source platform after reaching limitations with other solutions.

For example, if your sales increase tenfold from one day to the next, then Magento will be able to handle it comfortably for you without your store running into errors.

This makes it a great choice for businesses that experience heightened traffic or order volume at particular points in the year.

A key factor that affects scalability is a well-optimised database structure. Luckily, Magento has this one in the bag. As the platform is so flexible, your developer will be able to access and update different parts of your Magento database efficiently and easily.

Something to keep in mind is that, much like OpenCart or WooCommerce, Magento is an open source eCommerce platform, so third-party developers can build any type of extensions or integrations they see fit. This increases the capabilities of the platform in a huge way.

As Magento is resource-intensive, Magento business owners usually need to host their stores on their own dedicated servers. Although this is an additional cost to factor in, it does mean that your store will run more efficiently and be able to handle more, making it suitable for businesses with a goal to scale quickly.



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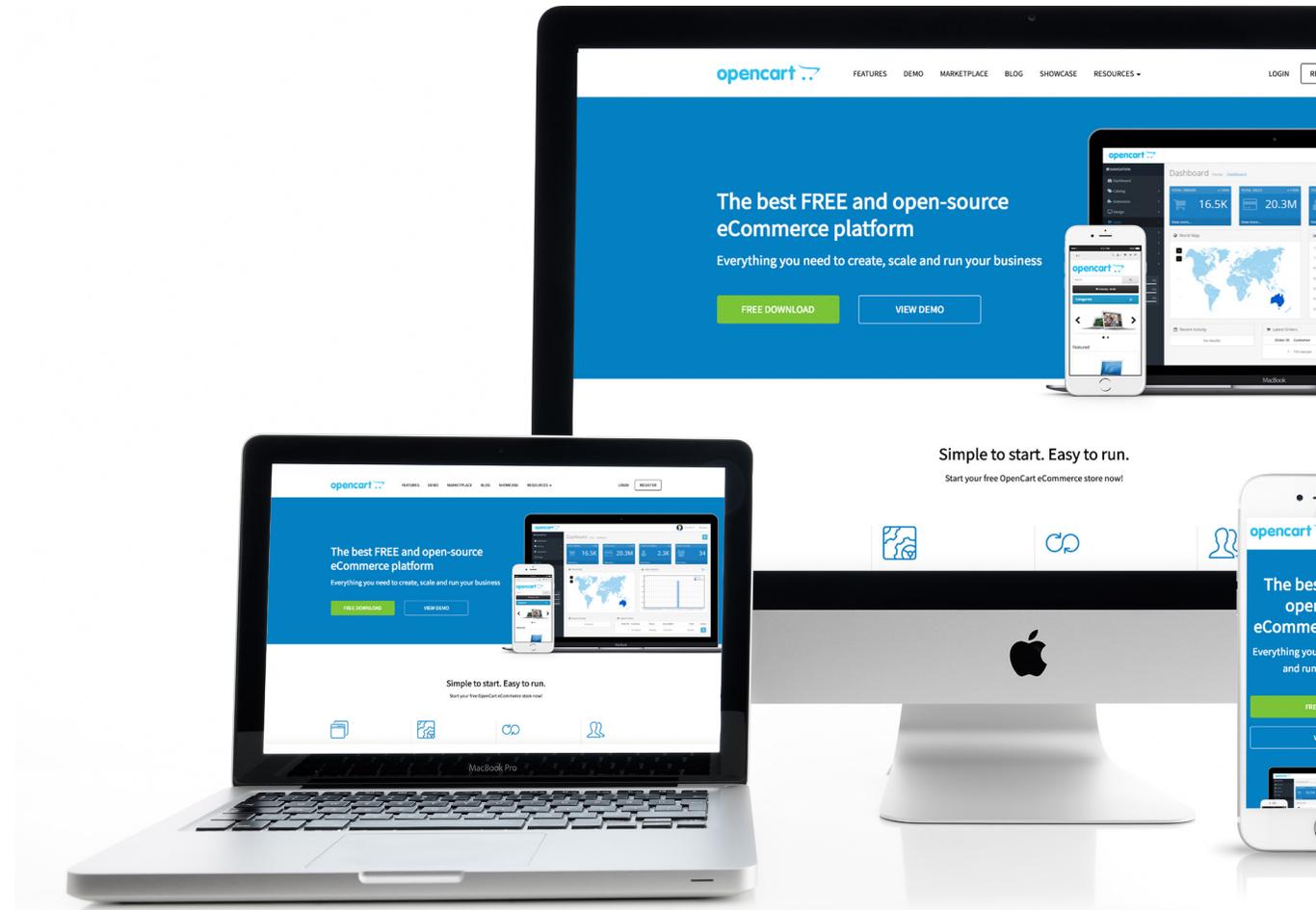
OpenCart: Overview

OpenCart is an open source eCommerce platform that is free to download and use. The software is scripted in PHP – a programming language that is widely-used by web developers and programmers.

Similar to Magento or PrestaShop, OpenCart follows a core set-up that you are responsible for hosting, installing, maintaining and updating. What's more, unlike some other open source eCommerce platforms, there's no hidden annual fee for updating the software.

In comparison with self-hosted solutions, such as Shopify and BigCommerce, OpenCart users have far more ownership over their businesses – which is a big pull for many shop owners.

According to sites like BuiltWith, OpenCart is very similar to Magento and PrestaShop in terms of gaining (and losing) customers. The platform is also winning a chunk of customers from less known platforms in the UK, such as osCommerce, Zen Cart and VirtueMart.





Ease of use

As OpenCart is open source, you will need someone with technical knowledge to set up your online store for you. The nature of the software means that you will need to control your hosting, site security and updates.

That said, OpenCart also gives users the option to buy the software with hosting already sorted and with the backend already set up. You will need to investigate this hosting provider to see if it fits your business requirements.

Once your store is online, you will still need to spend time understanding the backend of your site and how everything works in OpenCart. Although the interface is similar to other eCommerce platform, there are many different options that need more expertise.

After everything is set out how you want, adding products becomes an easier process. That said, it is still fairly time-consuming as there are so many different things that you can control and customise for each product.

OpenCart is unlikely to be the ideal solution for you if you don't have someone with developer knowledge on your team or don't have the resources at present to hire a professional to help you.

This is not to say it's impossible, but the idea behind open source software is that there's such a huge level of flexibility and freedom. If you only have limited

knowledge, then you're probably not going to get the maximum value from this type of solution. On top of this, the more extensions you add to your store, the more clunky it will become which can impact things like site loading time, number of sales made and website traffic.

If you plan to do this yourself, it is worth bearing in mind that the learning curve with OpenCart is steep and time-consuming – even for developers with PHP coding knowledge.

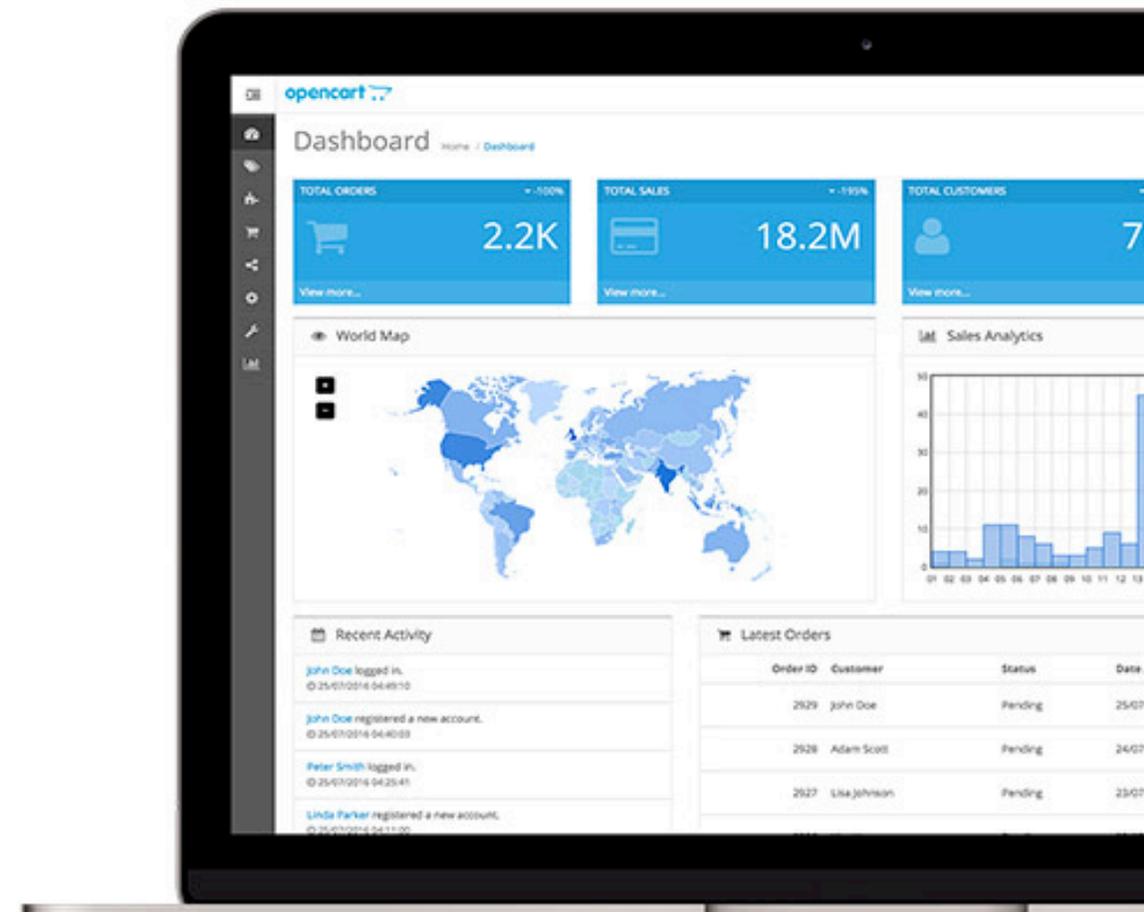


Time to market

It is difficult to put a timestamp on how long it may take before your OpenCart store is up and running. It depends entirely on the size and scope of your store, how many extra modules you want and whether or not you want custom design or functionalities.

Unlike hosted eCommerce platforms such as Shopify, which in some cases can be set up over a weekend, you're most likely going to be looking at a minimum timeframe of 1-3 months – providing you are dealing with an experienced web developer.

OpenCart also gives users the option to buy the eCommerce platform with hosting and the backend already sorted for you. Hosting is provided by OpenCart's gold partner A2 Hosting and you also have access to 24/7 support, 365 days a year.





Search engine optimisation

When it comes to search engine optimisation and whether or not OpenCart is a good fit, there's a lot of conflicting advice out there. Many reviews are of the opinion that OpenCart is not search engine friendly as many SEO elements aren't enabled by default.

OpenCart is open source software, which means that you have the freedom and flexibility to create and do exactly what you want, but this luxury means that you have to do much of the leg work for yourself.

The eCommerce platform does allow the use of SEO optimised URLs for product, category, manufacturer and information pages. To use SEO keywords, OpenCart users need to enable this in the store settings page, under the server tab in the admin interface.

You also need a correctly formatted .htaccess file present in the root of the OpenCart installation to

be able to add SEO keywords to individual products, manufacturers, categories and information pages.

Any SEO keywords you add will be displayed in the URL of the page, which means they need to be unique for each product, product category and so on. As you can probably guess, to do this successfully you will need access to an experienced web developer.

Many new businesses will find that this is either too time consuming or too expensive to maintain without any errors. If you are reliant on search engines for customers to find your website, then you may be better suited to a different eCommerce platform.

That said, OpenCart does have SEO extensions that you can buy for your online store to make this process much easier. One such tool is the SEO Backpack, which makes the process of optimising your website more accessible to a variety of abilities and more efficient.

The SEO Backpack will cost you \$99.99 and is an annual ongoing cost.

It's also worth keeping in mind that there is no inbuilt blog function for OpenCart users, but there are free blog modules that have been specifically designed for the platform.



Additional marketing features

What's great about OpenCart is the built-in marketing features the platform comes with. This allows you to run and track your marketing campaigns from inside the eCommerce platform.

Once your store is all set up, you'll be able to see the marketing section of the dashboard. This gives you a list of submenus named 'marketing', 'affiliates', 'coupons' and 'mail.'

OpenCart also generates customised reports based on specific data that you want to keep an eye on. For example, the number of views on a particular product or the number of purchases. The ability to do this from inside the platform can save you a significant amount of time.

However, to get the most out of marketing for OpenCart, you're probably going to need to install more modules. As we mentioned above, you can install a blog module, which can play a key role in ensuring your website is found by the people who want to buy your products.





Design

With every set-up, OpenCart provides a free default theme for all new users. Just like all available themes, the default layout can be built upon and customised if you would like to keep using it for your own online store.

If you want a different design, then OpenCart's marketplace offers a wide variety of free and premium storefront themes for users. There are over 260 layouts in total, with around 60 of these being free to use and the remaining premium themes ranging from \$20-\$149.

There is a good selection of modern shopfront layouts, but there are also many outdated designs that may not offer the same functionalities as newer options.

These themes are designed by the OpenCart Community, which essentially means third party developers or agencies. Some of these layouts offer free installations, but most require someone with developer knowledge to ensure a successful instalment.

All themes are fully editable providing you have the technical knowledge needed to do so. One of the biggest benefits to OpenCart is that it is open source software, which means you can have full control over the design and feel of your online store.

You can also make use of third-party marketplaces that provide storefront themes created for the eCommerce platform, but we advise doing your research and vetting out whoever has created the template; the last thing you want is a layout coded with errors or bugs!

A theme marketplace we recommend having a look at is ThemeForest. Here, you can see customer reviews and check out ratings for the OpenCart themes you're interested in using.



Extensions and integrations

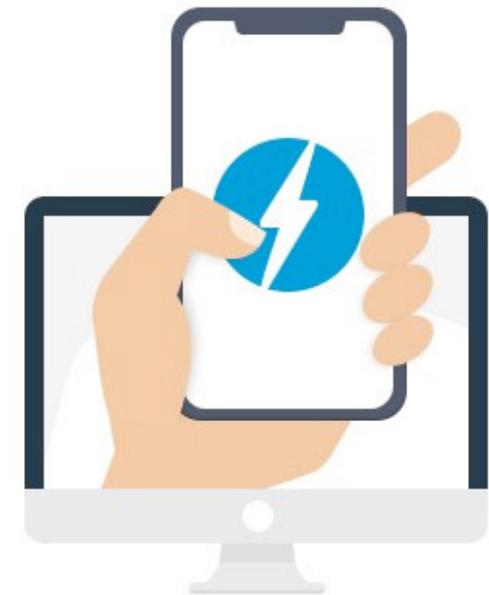
OpenCart is a light platform that requires extensions and integrations to be able to perform high-level functions, or for business owners to benefit from the same level of functionality as comes with all-in-one hosted eCommerce platforms.

Fortunately, the self-hosted solution comes with an extensive marketplace of over 13,000 add-ons and integrations. Of course, these extensions do come at a cost and you'll need to have the budget to support this. These add-ons tend to fall between costing nothing to around \$2,000, with a small handful being priced significantly higher.

The range of extensions and modules available for OpenCart users covers pretty much everything that you could ever need for your online store; from order totals to shipping methods to reports.

Keep in mind that while plenty of these extensions are free, many will cost you money. What's more, you're going to need plenty of extra modules and extensions so that you can run your online store effectively. These costs will add up quickly.

If you don't have a developer on your team or at least someone with a wealth of technical knowledge, you may find it increasingly difficult to make decisions when it comes to certain add-ons.





Customer support

OpenCart gives you two free ways to get in touch with customer support should you need to. While one of these options is to open a support ticket with the eCommerce platform, you also have the option to email the customer support team directly.

Something else to keep in mind is that the company's customer support is based in Hong Kong, with support hours running from 09:30-18:30 (HK) time. In the UK, this means customer support will answer your queries from 02:30-11:30, which may present a problem.

As OpenCart is free to download and use, you won't have much in the way of proper customer support. The complex nature of the software generally means you're going to need a developer on your side to help you set up and maintain your store's website.

That said, OpenCart does offer customer support packages that you can buy at an extra cost should you need to do so.

If you run into an immediate bug or issue that needs fixing right away, you can pay a one-time flat payment of \$99 for one month's worth of bug fixing with a guaranteed response time of up to 48 hours.

Alternatively, you can pay a monthly cost of \$99 for ongoing customer support. While you do get extra support, all questions are still handled through OpenCart's ticket support system. It's worth mentioning that this monthly cost is charged quarterly.





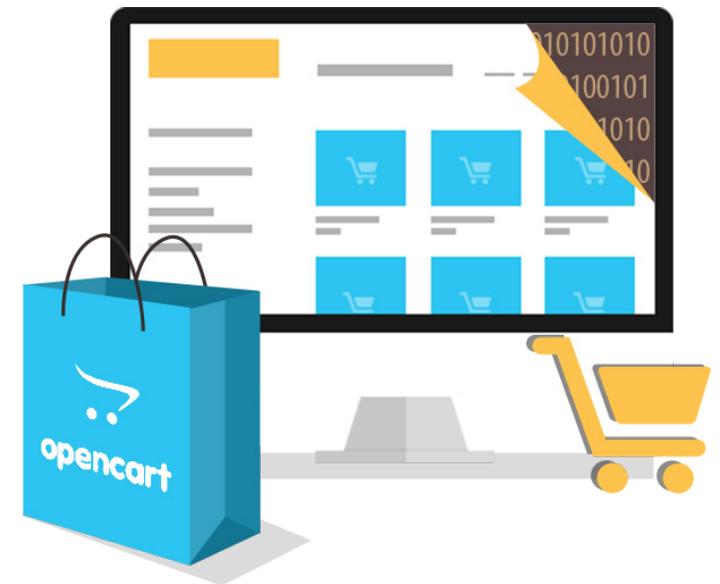
Online resources and community

Where OpenCart comes into its own is through its large and active online community. Any customer, developer, staff member or person curious about OpenCart is able to make an account and contribute to the eCommerce platform's community forums.

The forums are mostly used by members who use the OpenCart platform rather than the OpenCart employees. There's around 100,000 members on the forums, so it's pretty likely someone will know the answers to any questions you may have.

You can also make use of Reddit, where OpenCart has its own community forum. This is less active than the official forums, but it may be worth a look for information. As well as this, there's an unofficial Facebook group for users called "OpenCart eCommerce."

OpenCart also provides some other online resources to help you understand how to use the eCommerce platform. There are a range of videos covering installation, set up and other issues (such as implementing SEO keywords) that can help you out.





Pricing

The OpenCart software is free to download and use, but as you probably already know, this doesn't mean that there are no costs related to using the platform. In fact, there are plenty.

As the eCommerce platform is open source, you are in control of your online hosting, domain name registration, security compliance and site and software maintenance. These are ongoing costs that you'll need to factor in.

There are also extra one-off costs to consider. For example, whether you want to buy a premium theme or custom design for your store. While there are free themes to save you money, it's really important to have a store that resonates with your customers.

You will also want to think about your budget for setting up your OpenCart store – whether you have an experienced developer on your team or if you need to pay a professional freelancer or agency.

It's worth mentioning that OpenCart does give you the option for a quicker and easier set up should you want it. The platform has a trusted partner (A2 Hosting) that will host your store and automatically set up the backend of OpenCart with a default storefront theme.

Keep in mind that monthly pricing may fluctuate with A2 Hosting and, depending on the hosting plan you choose, you may find that your ability to scale is affected. However, the hosting provider does give you 24/7 support, 365 days a year.



Scalability

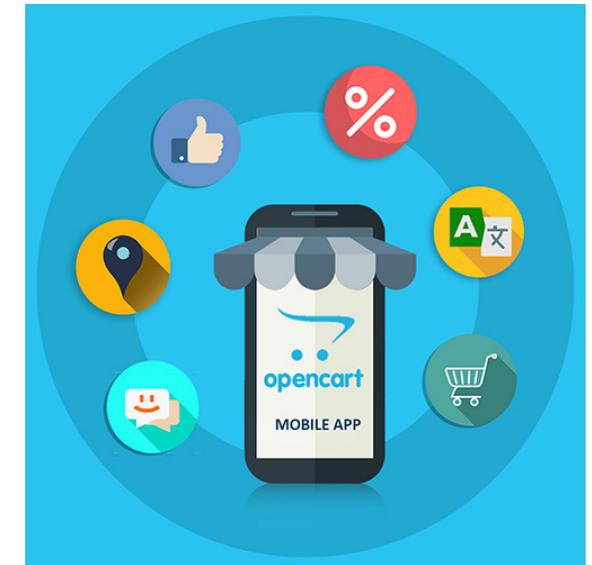
Scalability with OpenCart is a bit difficult to answer. In some respects, the platform is open source and businesses can – and do – scale successfully with the eCommerce solution.

That said, if you're looking to scale to the point of turning over tens of millions, then you may find OpenCart may not be the best solution for you.

One reason for this is that scaling an eCommerce business on OpenCart generally requires plenty of extra functionality and the platform can become more complex and bulkier the more add-ons you decide to help grow your online business.

Your site performance is also largely dependent on the hosting provider you use. As your OpenCart business grows, you may want to consider setting up your own servers to help you scale further.

Customer opinions are a bit of a mixed bag when it comes to scaling through OpenCart. While many believe it's suitable for growing a business, others express concern about enterprise-level businesses being able to scale through the eCommerce platform.





PrestaShop

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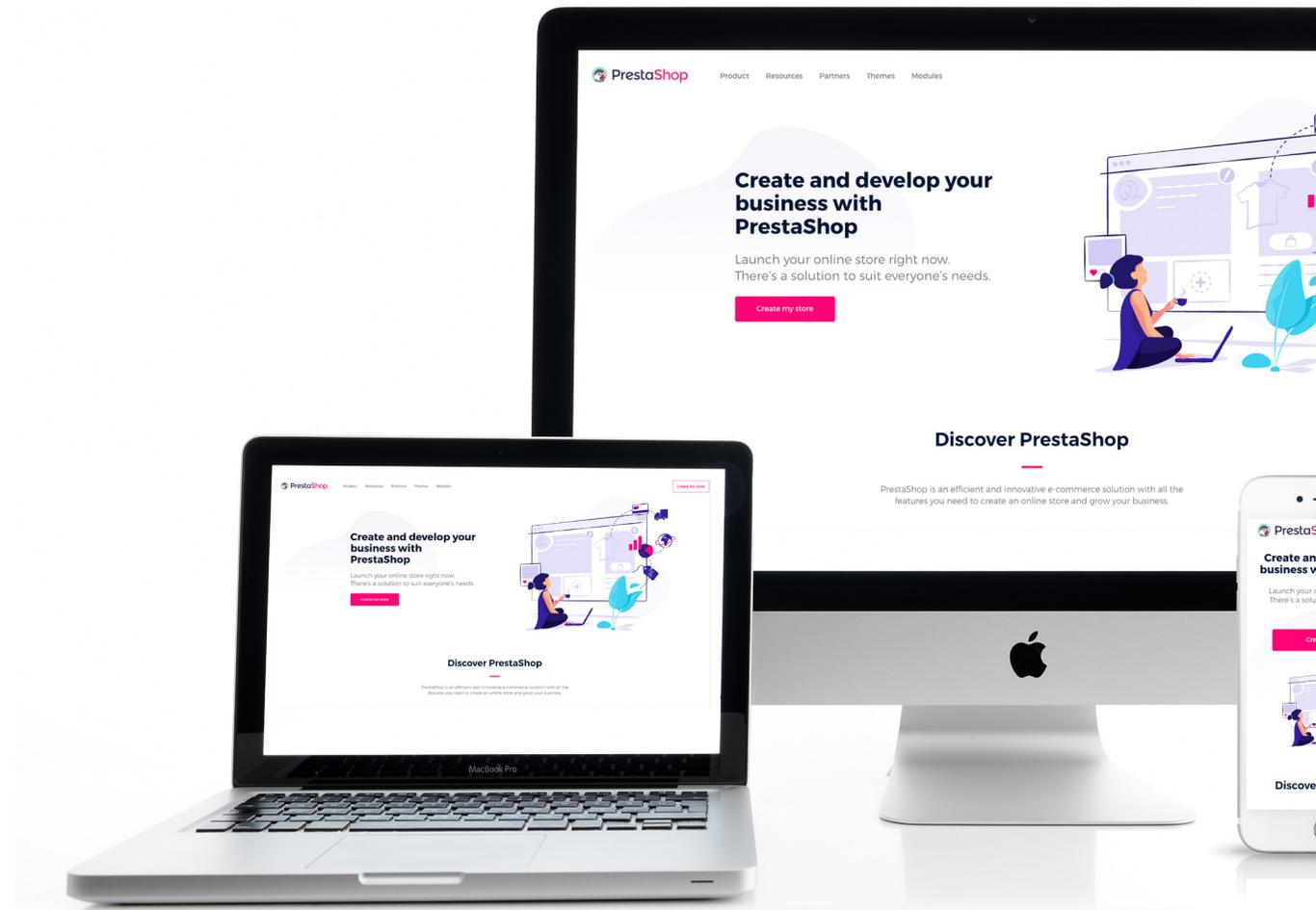


PrestaShop: Overview

Formed in 2007, PrestaShop is a popular eCommerce platform for online sellers across the world. Based in France, it provides support and many online resources in a variety of languages, which lends itself well to businesses located overseas.

If you're looking to compare eCommerce platforms and aren't too sure where PrestaShop fits in, then we can only suggest that you read on. This PrestaShop review looks at both the advantages and disadvantages associated with the eCommerce software.

As open source software, many online sellers draw comparisons between PrestaShop, Magento and WooCommerce. And they'd be quite right to. On first look, PrestaShop seems like it might sit comfortably between the two in terms of use.





Ease of use

As PrestaShop is open source (free to download and use), you will need to spend some time sorting out your hosting and/or server(s), understand the ins and outs of creating databases and be able to upload and install the software by yourself.

This is where having a technical wizard on your team comes in handy. You need access to someone with developer knowledge, otherwise you run the risk of setting up your shop incorrectly or maybe not even at all.

If you don't have much technical knowledge, then we recommend hiring a developer or programmer to sort out the integrations and extensions for your business. The last thing you want is an online store that's loaded with errors from the get-go.

On the other hand, if you're a smaller business and don't have these resources, then we suggest looking beyond PrestaShop and other open source platforms for the time being. You may find an all-in-one solution is far more efficient and cost-effective for you.





Time to market

After you reach a decision on whether or not to use PrestaShop to support your online business, how long will it take before you can start selling online?

This is a bit tricky to answer, as the simple response would be is that it depends entirely on the size and scope of your business. But it won't be something you'll be able to start selling on over a weekend, so if time is a priority, you'll want to look beyond PrestaShop.

As PrestaShop is an open source eCommerce platform, you'll need to allow time and other resources for the backend of your shop to be set up, as well as working out exactly how you want your shopfront to look and feel and what you sort of things you want to be able to do.

It's unlikely that a business owner would choose an open source solution like PrestaShop and be content with a premade theme. If you don't want much customisation, you'd be in a better position to choose an all-in-one solution that's simple to use, such as Shopify.

The whole point behind an open source eCommerce platform such as PrestaShop is that it allows you to have a completely custom and unique online store that addresses your needs and the needs of your customers.

In reality, you're probably looking at 1-3 months minimum when it comes to selling online through PrestaShop. But then again, if you don't have many products to upload then it may be closer to the one-month mark.



Search engine optimisation

When it comes to PrestaShop and search engine optimisation, there seems to be both advantages and disadvantages depending on the resources you have access to and the capabilities your team.

At its most basic level, PrestaShop enables edits to page titles, meta descriptions, keywords and URLs.

You are also able to index your products and site, which is necessary for a well-optimised online store. PrestaShop doesn't come with a built-in blog, but you can buy a blog module extension from between £25 to £90. Keep in mind these may be ongoing costs rather than one-offs.

You can also look towards making use of an SEO module from the PrestaShop marketplace to make optimising your pages a bit easier; however, again, you may want to factor in that this will be an ongoing extra cost.





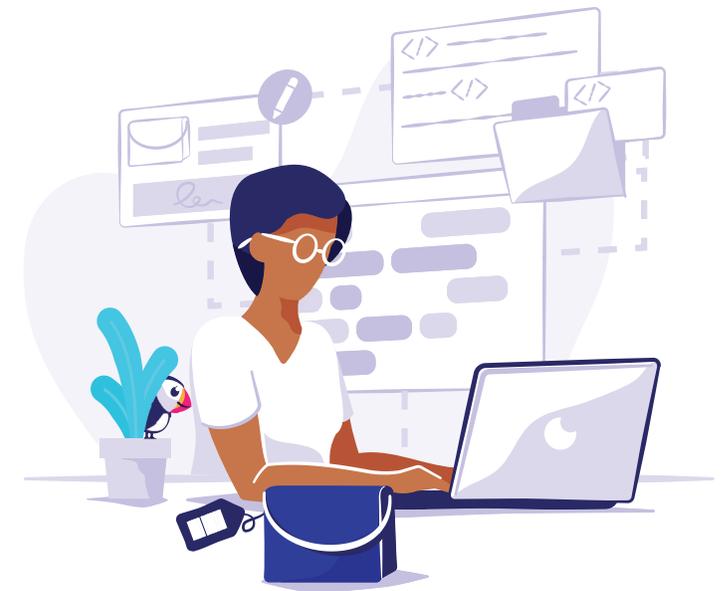
Additional marketing features

For an open source eCommerce platform, PrestaShop has been set up pretty well – it almost has as many built-in marketing features as the likes of Magento.

For example, you can create special offers or make use of built-in email marketing to reduce shopping cart abandonment and can segment your customers to reach them more effectively – something that is usually a paid feature on many eCommerce platforms.

In terms of data and analytics, you can measure the impact of promotional campaigns and make use of reports on traffic into your site visitors and the way they navigate.

If you're seeking more detailed analytics, it's worth considering making an investment in additional software or perhaps looking for an alternative solution. Either way, the in-built analytics are sufficient enough for a small business to sell online effectively at the start.





Design

With over 2,200 storefront paid themes available in the PrestaShop Marketplace, you will be sure to find a template that suits your needs. The majority of these layouts are fully responsive, modern and clean, priced between £55-£225.

You can browse layouts by industry, style or even included functionalities. For example, whether your layout is responsive, SEO optimised, uses custom fonts and more. You can also search via customer review ratings, colours and website column structure.

All premade storefront layout purchases come with three months of customer support and technical documentation. Just over 1,000 store themes come with a “Zen Option” which includes 12 months of customer support.

As PrestaShop is open source, one of the biggest advantages is that you fully customise these themes until your store looks and works exactly how you have in mind. To do this successfully, you will need a tech wizard who knows HTML and CSS – or you can hire one.

If you don’t have the technical expertise needed, then there is a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor you can use to make minor updates to how your online store looks without needing to know how to code whatsoever. For example, in the WYSIWYG editor, you can add in your logo, change colours and fonts or update page layouts and page content.

Keep in mind that these PrestaShop premade layouts are designed by hundreds of developers, and not all are vetted like you may think. That said, there is a “PrestaTrust” stamp given to store layouts that have been fully tested by the platform.



Extensions and integrations

Something that makes PrestaShop stand out in comparison to the likes of Shopify is the huge number of extensions available for your online store. With over 3,000 PrestaShop modules to choose from, you're likely to find the integration or functionality you need.

These modules can help you to increase website traffic and conversion rates, improve site navigation, productivity and customer relations and offer over a hundred modules to help improve the average value of a customer's shopping cart.

Typically, the prices range between £100 and £200.

Integrations are available as one-time purchases, and many are available in multiple languages. Most of these come with three months' worth of temporary customer support to help you get best use out of each module.

While it's true that that the cost of PrestaShop modules can add up quickly, you may want to compare the cost difference between hiring a developer or making use of these extensions. Generally, you will find that using extensions is more cost-effective.

That said, not having a developer on your team to create integrations or add-ons for your online store and to fix any issues may cause you more problems. These extensions have been developed by hundreds of programmers, so not all are guaranteed to work together.

It's worth bearing in mind that many of these modules are already built-in to many hosted eCommerce platforms, such as LemonStand or 3dcart. These hosted solutions can work out far cheaper for smaller businesses when comparing against the cost of modules.

To get the best use out of PrestaShop, you will need to install a selection of different add-ons to meet your needs. Of course, this will take up space on your server, which can make your site feel clunky and affect site loading time.



Customer support

Just like Magento, WooCommerce and OpenCart, PrestaShop is open source and free to download and use, which generally means there's little in the way of customer support.

However, should you want to pay a fee then you'll be able to make use of PrestaShop's customer support packages. Although there's written technical documentation to support you, again this will require a solid foundation of developer knowledge to understand fully. Should you want to pay small fee, you can access more user-friendly support guides.

That said, PrestaShop does have a contact number for general enquiries, which you can make use of before becoming a customer to test the waters a bit. Keep in mind that because PrestaShop is based in France, UK customer service hours are between 11am-8pm.

You will find, however, that your best level of support will come from the PrestaShop community forums. In other words, other business owners and developers are your best bet when it comes to sorting out your eCommerce platform problems.

This is a definite plus if you're a business owner with a developer on your team. You'll need access to someone with this level of technical expertise to understand the errors or bugs on your code and be able to communicate and resolve the issue for you.

If you don't have a programmer or developer on your side, then you may find the community forums aren't the best way for you to solve problems. You may prefer talking to someone in person or over the phone to get to the root of the error.



Online resources and community

Although there isn't much in the way of free customer support, PrestaShop more than makes up for this in terms of its online resources – both paid for and free.

For starters, PrestaShop provide paid training courses for developers to work out how to get the best use out of the eCommerce platform. These courses range from beginner level to advanced and prices are available on request.

There is also a free webinar for merchants who want to set up a PrestaShop store. However, where you will find the most active support is the PrestaShop community forums.

This is great if you have a self-starting attitude, but if you lack technical knowledge you may find that searching on forums and waiting for responses an ineffective way to solve any problems that you run into as a PrestaShop user.





Pricing

Although PrestaShop is free to download and use, there are several hidden and ongoing costs you'll need to consider. Much of this has to do with the platform being open source, so it is similar to the likes of Magento, WooCommerce and OpenCart in this respect.

You'll need to factor in your own hosting or set up a server if you sell high volumes of products. Depending on the size and scope of your online store, this is likely to set you back a monthly recurring cost of £5.00-£30.00.

As well as this, you'll need to factor in your domain name registration – your unique website URL. This can vary in cost a lot, so make sure to do your research. Generally speaking, you shouldn't need to pay more than around £10.00 per year.

Although your storefront layout is likely to be a one-off cost, you'll still want to factor in. It's unlikely you'll want to keep using the one free theme that PrestaShop users are given. A premium layout can set you back between £50.00-£200.00.

Extensions and add-ons are where the true cost of your online shop starts to reveal itself. While extensions aren't required to run your online store, you will need them if you plan to grow your business. These are quite high cost, falling within £100-£200 per add-on.

Finally, if you need to make use of a professional for web design services, then you could be looking at hundreds, if not thousands, more to add to your budget for PrestaShop. It can be challenging to do a cost-benefit analysis, but we thoroughly recommend it.



Scalability

As an open source solution, there are a number of external factors (such as your online hosting) that will affect your ability to scale.

That said, there are a number of PrestaShop reviews left by real customers that question whether or not the eCommerce platform is a scalable solution. If you are selling a small number of products (up to 2,000) then it seems PrestaShop works fine.

However, if you have plans to scale your PrestaShop business any further than this, then there is a trending opinion from customer reviews on Capterra that you may be better off looking for an alternative eCommerce platform, such as Magento.

As PrestaShop requires you to invest in extensions, your site can become bulky and affect your site loading time, which can directly impact your success with scaling through the solution. Depending on how many you use, these add-ons may eat up your budget as a smaller business, which you may have wanted to spend elsewhere within your business.

It's also worth mentioning customers frequently mention bugs and errors in their codes. Again, this can affect your ability to scale with PrestaShop. The more time you have to spend fixing errors, the less time you can spend growing your business.

Prestashop seems to be a scalable eCommerce platform up to an extent. If you have no plans to break into selling thousands of products, then you're more than likely to find your needs are met in terms of scalability, but there is a limit on big enterprise.



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Shopify: Overview

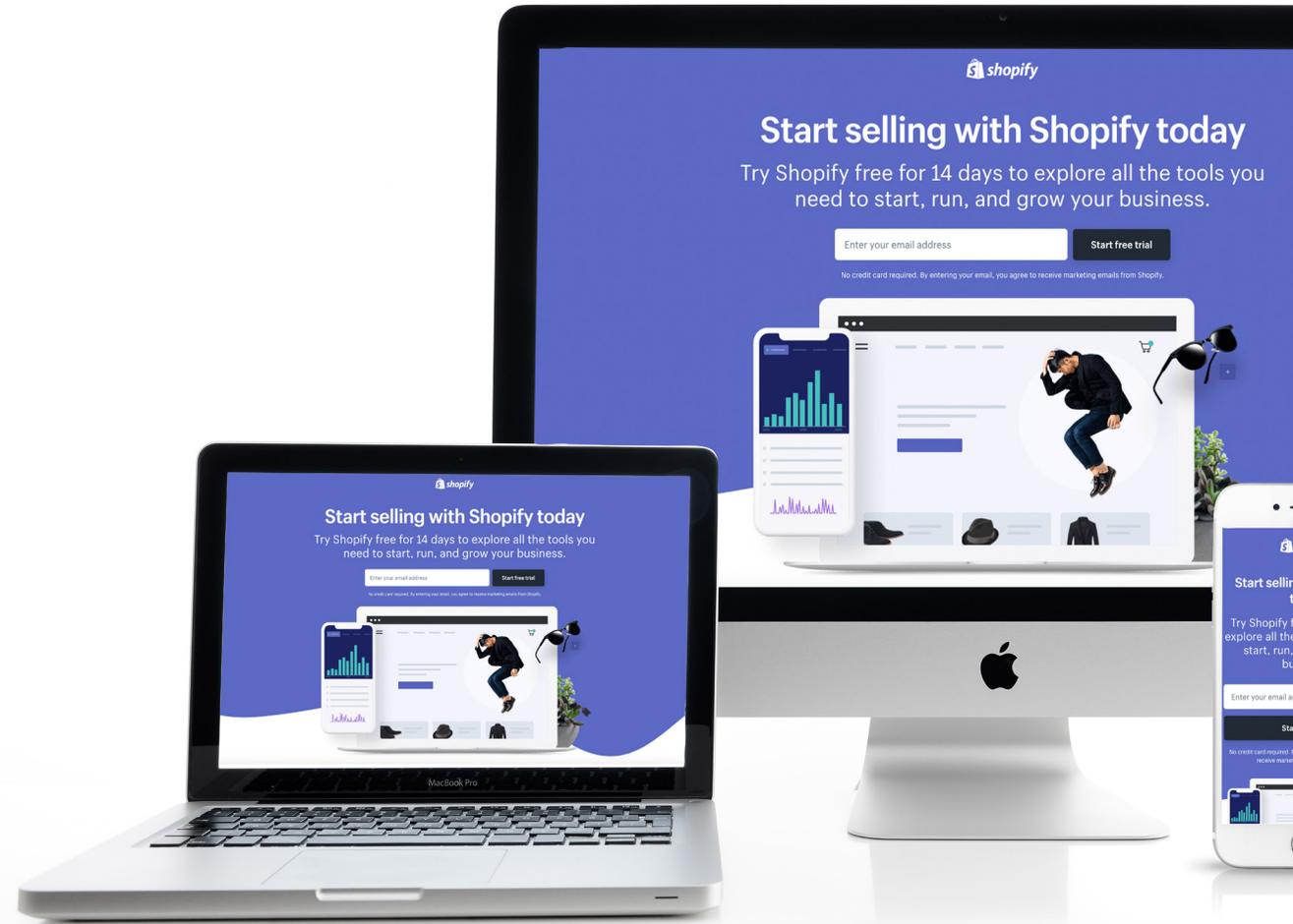
Shopify is one of the most popular eCommerce platforms available to online sellers. Formed in 2007, the eCommerce platform a hosted solution that is on a mission to make the online selling process as simple and as user-intuitive as possible.

At the same time, due to the Shopify's sheer popularity there's also lots of conflicting information about the solution that can be found all over the web. What exactly should you believe and what shouldn't you?

Because of this it can be especially difficult when you're trying to compare Shopify with BigCommerce or other hosted eCommerce platforms like EKM PowerShop, which is often seen as a UK-based alternative to Shopify.

This Shopify review will take a close look at Shopify and its three main account plans. For clarity, it will not look at Shopify Plus, which is the platform's enterprise edition.

The article will shine a spotlight on the eCommerce platform and talk through the advantages and disadvantages associated with the Shopify – so that you can reach a conclusion as to whether or not it makes practical sense to support your business.





Ease of use

Shopify takes pride in taking the complexity out of running an online store and making it as simple as possible for online business owners. As one of the most popular online selling solutions, it's also one of the most intuitive and user-friendly platforms available.

As Shopify is an all-in-one hosted eCommerce platform, you don't need to worry about things like hosting, security or updating the software. This is all taken care of for you.

All you need to do to start setting up your online store is to sign up with an account on Shopify's website. Then, you'll be taken straight to the backend of your online shop.

Adding products is a simple process and you even have control over the SEO elements of your product pages. That said, Shopify can automatically handle on-page SEO, which is a plus if you're looking to save time.





Time to market

Shopify is an incredibly easy and user-intuitive eCommerce platform that enables you to sell online quickly.

For this reason, you could easily be set up with an online store in a day or over a weekend.

This turnaround time does depend on the size and scope of your online business (e.g. how many products do you have to add?) and the level of customisation you want, but generally speaking a lot of customers choose Shopify for its simplicity and efficiency.





Search engine optimisation

Shopify simplifies as much of the online selling process as possible for its users and optimising your online shop for search engines is one aspect of this.

The eCommerce platform comes with the main SEO options that most other hosted solutions also offer. For example, customisable title tags, 301 redirects, some meta information and automatic sitemap generation.

If you want to fix more of your SEO functionality for your website, then you can look towards the Shopify App store. There's an SEO Manager app which gives you more control with a friendly user interface but does cost \$20.00 per month, which will add up quickly.

It should be made known that there are other eCommerce platforms that you won't need to pay these extra ongoing costs for to obtain the same SEO benefits. However, most of these are open source platforms and will require technical expertise. Like we said earlier, the best platform for your business will depend entirely on your needs.

A disadvantage to Shopify is that it takes care of so much for you. There are lots of search engine optimisation elements that are desirable for any on-line business, but as Shopify users do not control the software or hosting environment you can't control these.

For example, you don't get access to the Robots.txt file and sitemaps are generated automatically, so they are not normally editable. When your business reaches a certain size, you may find that you want to control these elements to boost your rankings.



Additional marketing features

In comparison to many other eCommerce platforms, Shopify doesn't actually offer a whole lot of built-in marketing features. Part of this is what makes Shopify so efficient and simple to use, which is great for ensuring productivity, uptime and site loading speed.

Shopify does give its users the ability to create discounts and offer these coupons to certain groups of customers to reach and engage your customer base more effectively. You also have the option of a blog, which can act as a portal for your store and increase sales.

You'll also have access to reporting and analytics to inform your marketing campaigns, but the detail on offer will depend on the plan you choose. As you may have guessed, the more you pay then the more detailed insight and data you'll receive for your online store.

Aside from setting up automatic email notifications to be sent when customers complete certain actions on your website, if you want to make proper use of email marketing then you'll need to integrate with an email marketing service provider, such as MailChimp.

Similarly, if you want to achieve anything else via marketing for your online store, then it's off to the Shopify App Marketplace you go, where you'll find over 400 marketing apps. For example, you'll find social media following and sharing buttons available as an add-on.

Something pretty unique about Shopify is its Kit add-on to support your digital marketing campaigns. Kit is a digital assistant that you control through your phone to drive more sales, set up social media ads/posts, engage with customers, generate sales reports and more.



Design

Shopify offers 65 free and premium shop templates for its users. The paid themes – of which there are 55 – range from \$140-\$180 and most offer up to four different layout styles. The remaining ten are free to use.

These designs are modern and fully responsive across all digital devices. Whichever Shopify template you may use, you have the option to adjust how the layout looks, and you don't need to understand code or have any technical knowledge whatsoever.

You can achieve this through Shopify's visual layout editor. Here, you can add specific content sections to your homepage, such as a product image slideshow. You can also adjust colours, fonts and add images onto each page as well as your logo.

If you want to customise your Shopify layout any further than this, then it is possible, but you will need to understand HTML, CSS and JavaScript. Most of Shopify's themes use Liquid – Shopify's templating language – so this is another barrier to consider.

If you have an in-house developer, then you may be better off choosing an eCommerce platform that uses familiar coding rather than unique coding. Otherwise, your developer will need the time, resources and support to learn.

Keep in mind it can be complicated to take advantage of Shopify theme updates and you may find that you need technical help to make sure that you do this successfully and don't disrupt your online business. Fortunately, Shopify offers 24/7 customer service support..



Extensions and integrations

The Shopify App Store has hundreds of new shop features, services and plugins that can be integrated with your Shopify store.

As Shopify is a very popular eCommerce platform, most add-ons have hundreds (if not thousands) of reviews so you can make informed decisions with confidence.

If you're looking for a hosted eCommerce platform with more add-ons than any other solution, then Shopify is likely to be your best bet. The platform is more or less on par with Magento – an open source self-hosted solution in terms of extensions available.

The Shopify App Store has add-ons to help with product sourcing, marketing and sales, shipping and inventory management, customer service and accounting and on-site tools. You will be more or less guaranteed to find the add-on you're looking for with Shopify.

What's more, Shopify is a big name, so you can be sure that whichever service you need your eCommerce platform to integrate with, Shopify will likely have an integration for it. For example, the hosted solution integrates with QuickBooks, Google Shopping, PayPal, Campaign Monitor and MailChimp to name a few.

Integrating these apps with your online store is very easy. You don't need to be a technical wizard in order to get your extensions working. In fact, most just need you to click a couple of buttons and you're all set.

While many of these extensions are free, it does have to be made clear that there are many that require monthly recurring payments. For example, the SEO Manager tool is an extra ongoing cost of \$20.00, and many shop owners will deem this an essential feature.



Customer support

Shopify's customer support is accessible round the clock 24/7.

Compared to many other hosted eCommerce solutions, Shopify has really hit the nail on the head when it comes to looking after their customers – and this comes from the customers themselves.

Like most eCommerce platforms, the platform offers live chat support. This is claimed to be the most effective way to get in touch as it's the option with the fastest response time.

However, you can also contact Shopify through phone, email and Twitter. Some online reviewers have mentioned that these processes are also incredibly efficient just as the live chat feature.





Online resources and community

Shopify's customer support is accessible round the clock 24/7.

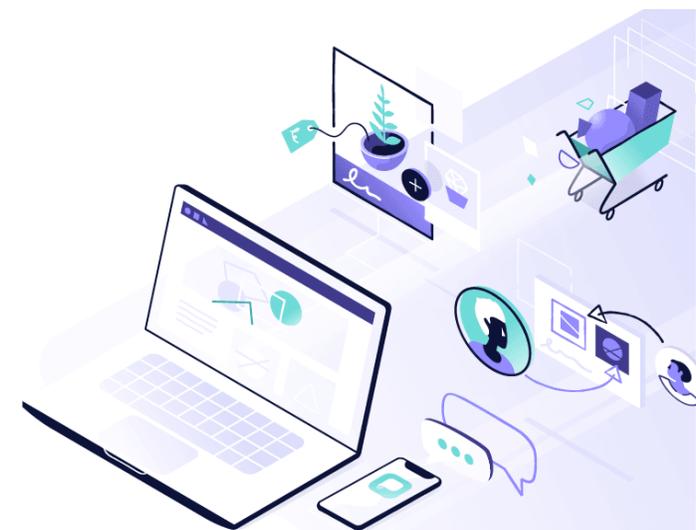
If you're new to selling online and don't understand the jargon that you may come across, then it can be useful to refer to Shopify's encyclopaedia page.

Similarly, Shopify Academy gives you the tools and knowledge you need to create a successful online shop.

Shopify also has a large community forum with lots of members posts. However, in comparison to the likes of Magento or PrestaShop, there doesn't seem to be many responses to the majority of posts.

That said, unlike Magento, Shopify community forum responses are mostly written by Shopify experts or Shopify employees.

What's more, as Shopify is one of the most popular eCommerce platforms, you will find plenty of freelancers, agencies and individuals discussing how to get the best use out of Shopify online.





Pricing

If you decide to go with Shopify, then there are three different payment plans to choose from: Basic Shopify, Shopify and Advanced Shopify. You also have the option of using Shopify Lite (selling through social media) or Shopify Plus (ideal for big enterprise).

The main differences between these tiered pricing plans include the number of user accounts available to you, credit card rates and transaction fees and product features.

Let's break these plans down a little.





Shopify Basic

\$29

per month

For \$29 a month, the Basic Shopify plan gives you access to two user accounts, with an unlimited number of products and file storage. You'll also get access to all the basics that you'll need to start selling online straight away as a new business.

However, you will be charged credit card rates of 2.2% + 20p online and 1.7% + 0p in-person (e.g. over the phone). If you use external payment gateways, which most online businesses will do, then you will also be charged 2.0% transaction fees. This is one clear disadvantage to using Shopify when you compare eCommerce platforms. Most online eCommerce platforms don't charge you transaction fees and this could become costly for you, especially as a small or new business or if you plan to sell in large volumes.

All plans benefit from 24/7 customer support and an SSL security certificate.

Shopify

\$79

per month

For \$79 per month, the Shopify plan gives you access to up to five user accounts. You'll receive all the basic essentials in the previous plan, as well as gift cards and access to professional reporting to help you make more informed decisions to grow your business.

Online credit card rates are charged at 1.9% + 20p and in person transactions (e.g. over the phone) 1.6% + 0p, while transaction fees using external payment gateways are charged at 1.0%.

Advanced Shopify

\$299

per month

If you're at the tipping point for scaling your online business, then the most appropriate plan for you to be on is Advanced Shopify. This sets you back \$299 a month, so you will need to be turning over a substantial profit to make this plan viable.

You will still be charged credit card rates at 1.6% + 20p for online purchases and 1.5% for in-person transactions (e.g. over the phone or in-store), as well as Shopify transaction fees which are charged at 0.5% for using external payment gateways.

As an Advanced Shopify user, you will have access to two more features to help you scale your eCommerce business. These are an advanced report builder and third-party calculated shipping rates.



Scalability

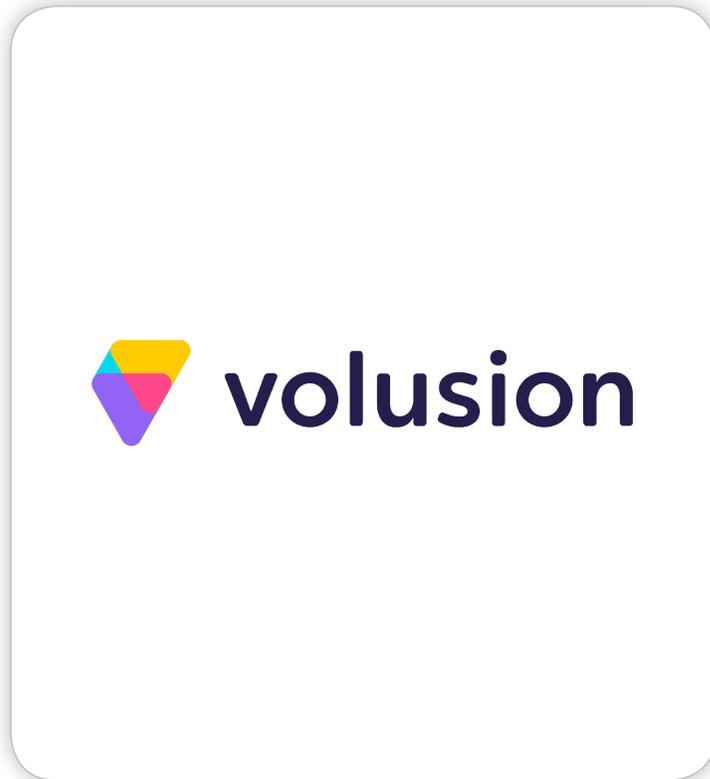
The first factor to consider when it comes to working out whether or not a hosted eCommerce platform is scalable or not is to assess the different monthly plans on offer.

Looking at Shopify, there's a clear path for growing your online business. Although we're looking directly at the three main Shopify plans, the platform also has a Shopify Lite version for social media sellers and Shopify Plus for big enterprise.

However, the three main Shopify plans vary in price quite a lot, which can make choosing to progress to the next plan a big business decision – especially as the features on offer don't offer much variation between them. The biggest difference is the number of account users.

Shopify is a perfect solution for new online sellers and small-medium online businesses without access to a developer or programmer. Each plan has benefits from an unlimited number of products and file storage, meaning you can sell as much as you want.

However, you may find the transaction fees that Shopify charges a bit of a barrier if you sell a high volume of products at a low cost. This may prevent you from being able to scale beyond a certain level. And, with the introduction of Shopify Plus, it seems that Shopify is well aware of this and has worked towards a solution that caters to businesses with enterprise-level needs.



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Overview

Launched back in 1999, Volusion is an eCommerce platform that has stood the test of time. And, with 30,000 online stores and over 250 employees, the Texas-based eCommerce platform is clearly moving forwards.

As a hosted solution, Volusion may be a great option for business owners seeking an eCommerce platform that takes care of the difficult parts – hosting, security and updating – with an added layer of customisation if you know HTML/CSS.

This section puts the spotlight on Volusion so that you can decide if it meets the needs, goals and capabilities of your business.

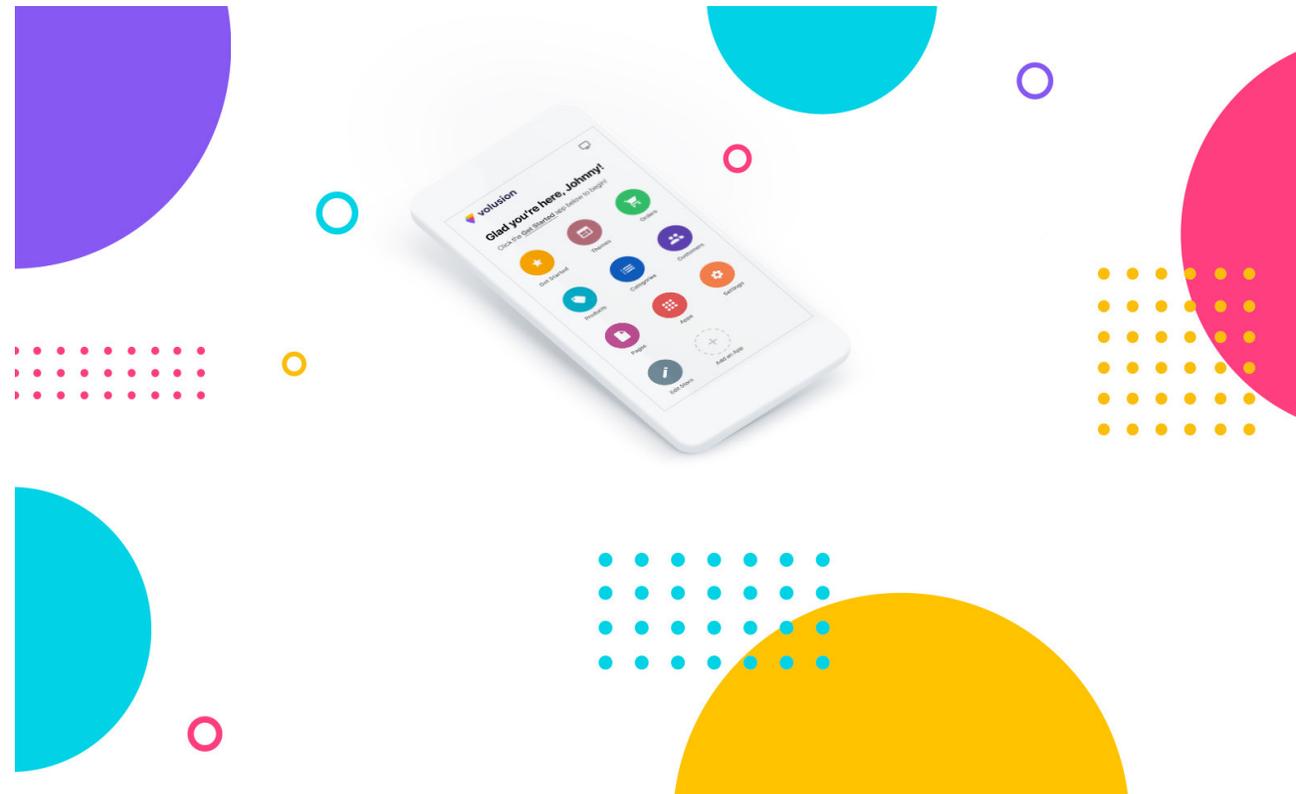




Ease of use

Volusion is an all-in-one eCommerce platform, which means that you don't need to have technical knowledge to get your online business up and running.

One thing worth pointing out though is that while the Volusion interface is fairly clean, it is arguably less user-friendly or as simple as the likes of Shopify or 3dcart. Depending on your familiarity with eCommerce platforms, it may take you a little time to get used to using the platform and working out where things are.



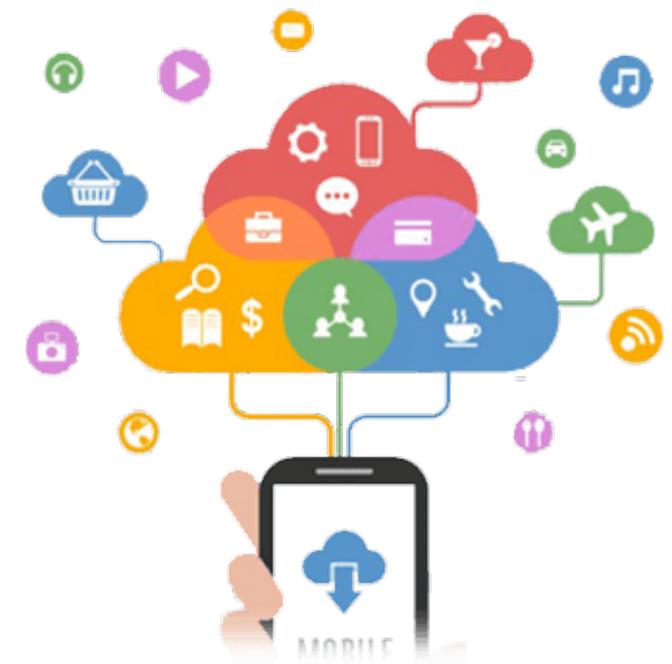


Time to market

Depending on the size and scope of your business, it's quite likely that you could set up your online store over the course of a weekend if not less, although we recommend taking some more time to make sure everything is as it should be.

This is great for business owners seeking an eCommerce platform that will allow them to sell almost immediately – time is of the essence for many.

Another way to save time is by making use of the premade shop templates. Keep in mind that if you're looking to do anything drastic to the HTML/CSS or use a custom-made theme, then this is likely to prolong your time to market.





Search engine optimisation

Volusion gives its shop owners the ability to customise a number of SEO elements to improve their search rankings. Similar to 3dcart, you can enter your own custom metadata (titles, descriptions and photo attributes), create custom URLs and make use of sitemap indexing.

You are also able to edit your Robots.txt file to determine what parts of your online store you want search engines to crawl and the parts that you don't. However, you will need knowledge of technical SEO to do this successfully.

Site speed and loading time seems to have been a bit of an issue for the eCommerce platform according to customer reviews, which can be problematic as this will directly affect where you're placed on search engine results.

However, earlier this year Volusion moved to Google Cloud Platform – the first eCommerce platform to do so. According to news reports, this has improved Volusion shop page load times by an average of 15% without needing to do any on-site optimisation whatsoever.

As Volusion is a hosted eCommerce platform, it has a far less customisable backend than an open source solution such as Magento. With the coding of your web pages influencing how effective your SEO efforts are, you may find Volusion's SEO functionalities to be less robust and effective.





Additional marketing features

There are a variety of ways Volusion users can promote their online store.

Like other eCommerce platforms, there is a built-in function that enables you to send out emails and newsletters to your customers without needing to leave the dashboard. You can also upload and edit your own newsletter templates, but if you want to brand and personalise your emails then you will need at least a basic level of HTML and CSS knowledge.

You can also send your emails either to your customers, all email subscribers, affiliates or your administrators, but you cannot tailor this any further. If you want to offer discounts and offers to particular customers or prospects then this is possible, but you can't segment your audience through the built-in email function, unlike other eCommerce platforms such as BigCommerce.

In terms of reporting and analytics, Volusion gives you access to basic built-in reporting features and you can integrate Google Analytics through the eCommerce platform to help you keep your costs down.



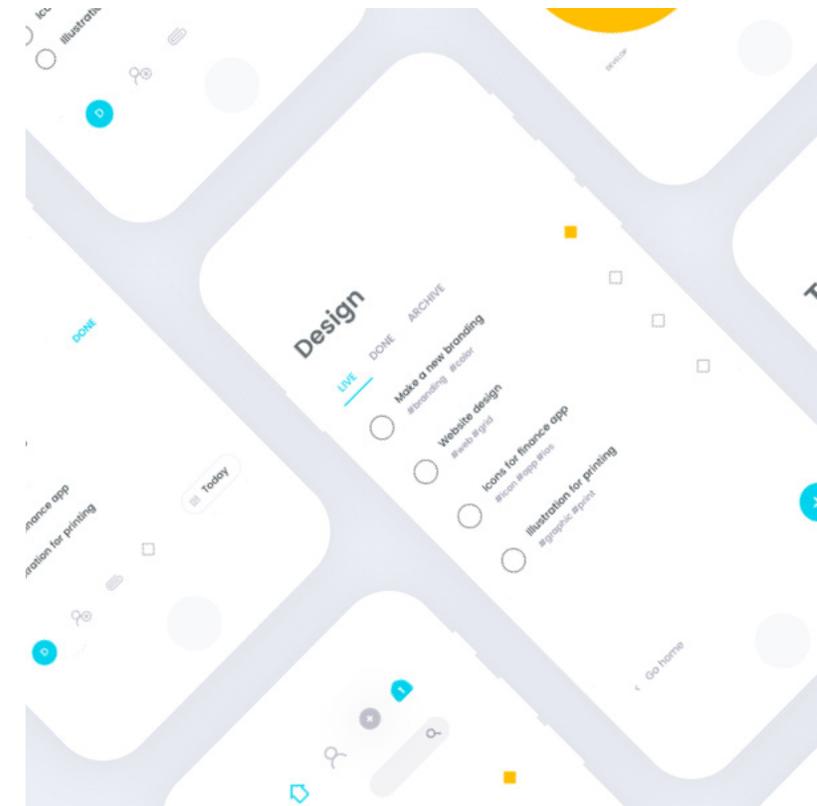
Design

Volusion provides its shop owners with a current total of 50 premade shop themes, all of which are fully responsive across devices and modern in design. You don't need to know how to code to edit these themes.

You can also create a homepage slideshow with relative ease, which can play an important role in attracting and engaging your site visitors and change the fonts and colours of your chosen theme with the storefront editor.

If you want to go beyond this and customise your store further, you'll need to have a good working knowledge of HTML and CSS. Simple coding edits are mostly fairly easy to learn, unlike extensive programming knowledge that you'd need with a solution like Magento.

True customisation will come through the API. In order to understand Volusion's full API capabilities we recommend speaking directly to a member of their team. It does have to be said that making use of the API will require advanced technical knowledge.





Extensions and integrations

There is approximately 75 app integrations and services available for Volusion users. Ten of these are free, while the remaining are priced at premium – you may need to factor in ongoing payments to keep the service or software active on your website.

While this is quite a small number compared to Shopify and other popular hosted eCommerce platforms, much of this has to do with the fact Volusion already has so many features packaged into its monthly solution.

Although Volusion's API is no longer closed or proprietary, you will only have access to the API on the two most expensive plans. These are the Business plan which is \$299 a month and Prime, which has personalised pricing based on the value of your business.



Customer support

If you need to contact Volusion customer support, you can do so either through the live chat feature on the website, email support or there is phone support, which is available on all payment plans – with the exception of the personal plan which only has online support.

Looking towards customer reviews, there are mixed opinions on the quality of customer service provided. The general consensus is that the support given to users is good quality, but the response time can sometimes be insufficient.

If you're going to need support and advice right away, then Volusion may not be the best solution for you. However, there are plenty of online resources provided by the eCommerce platform that may help you get the answers you need.



Online resources and community

Let's take the Volusion help centre. Here, you have support articles and video tutorials covering how to get the most out of the eCommerce platform. These are simply worded and to the point.

There are also detailed guides and a Volusion blog made up from a variety of vetted contributors to help you grow your business.

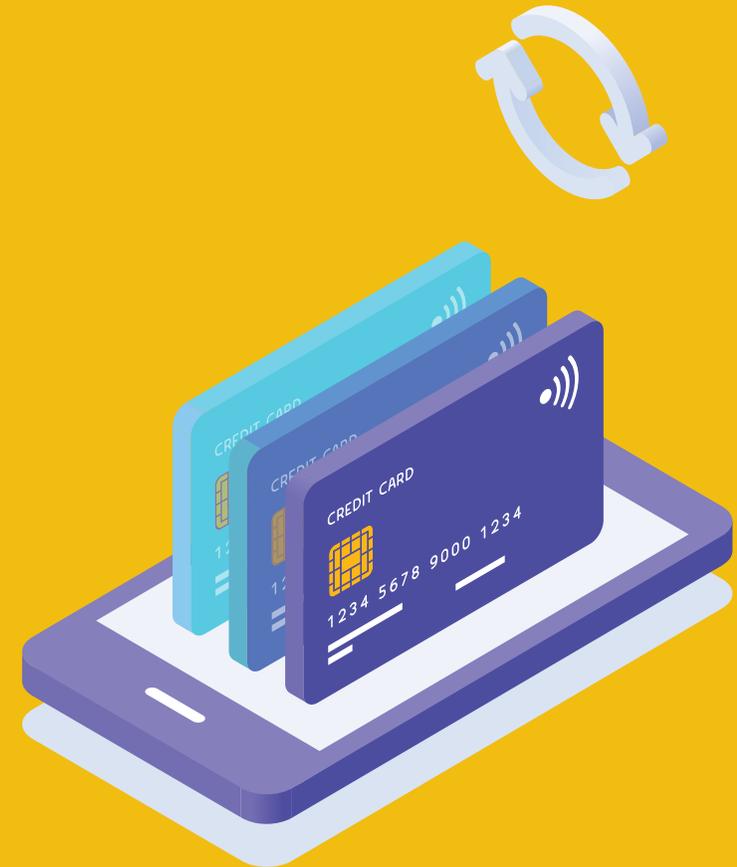
Unlike with LemonStand or Shopify, there are no signs of an independent growing online community. If you have a problem that you can't resolve, this means you'll either need to find the answer in the platform's support guides or make use of their customer support.



Pricing

Just as with other hosted eCommerce platforms, Volusion makes use of a tiered pricing structure and charges its users on a monthly basis, ranging from \$29-\$299 per month.

The key differences between the three main Volusion plans are that the number of products you can add to your website, but you can make as many sales as you like. Plus, some features are only accessible to more premium plans.





Personal Plan

\$29
per month

Within Volusion's Personal plan, you can upload up to 100 products on your website, benefit from 1GB of bandwidth and basic online support.

This is ideal for new online sellers with little technical experience who only want to sell through a website; if you already sell on marketplaces then this plan is not right for you.

You are limited to one user account, cannot sell on marketplaces, cannot make use of ratings, reviews or email newsletters or card abandonment reports. In our opinion, these are fundamental to the growth of a successful online business.

You also won't have access to CRM (customer relationship management) nor will you be able to log phone orders nor have access to the API.

Professional Plan

\$79
per month

The Volusion Plus plan enables you to upload up to 1,000 products, make use of up to five user accounts and to integrate with Amazon and eBay.

If you already sell on multiple different marketplaces, then you will need the next plan as you will need access to the API to create the integration. Alternatively, you could consider an inventory management system so that all your selling channels are located in one place.

As well as this, the professional plan enables you to make use of features like ratings and reviews, newsletters and can log phone orders.

Business Plan

\$299
per month

Within Volusion's Business plan, you're able to upload unlimited products, benefit from priority support and a dedicated team to help grow your business.

You may want to question what this success team looks like prior to selecting this plan so that you know exactly what type of service you can expect from the get-go.

The Business plan also gives you API access, batch order processing and being able to make use of basic platform features like customer loyalty plans and deals of the day.



Scalability

When it comes to choosing the best eCommerce platform to support your business, one factor that can be overlooked by businesses is how scalable the platform is. But, if you have plans to grow your business within the next few years, it's an element to consider.

Volusion has three different pricing plans, which used to vary in the amount of bandwidth you'll benefit from. Bandwidth is important as it affects your site's loading time and how much information you can store online.

During the time of writing this review, this has changed. All plans now benefit from unlimited bandwidth. And, as we have mentioned, Volusion has now completely moved over to Google Cloud. According to Google Cloud's case study, the difference in site performance – especially for larger customers – was immediately apparent.

What's more, during peak sales periods for retail like November and December, the Google Cloud platform enables Volusion to scale in seconds and allow its customers to capture the additional revenue, rather than needing to procure find and implement hardware over the course of many days or weeks.

That said, something else to consider is the fact that Volusion is gaining customers from small-level online selling solutions (like Yahoo or GoDaddy) but losing thousands to Shopify and BigCommerce.

This may suggest Volusion users hit a ceiling with the solution's capabilities at some point down the line, but it does have to be said that this is speculation – but it does seem like Volusion are acting quickly in response to this.



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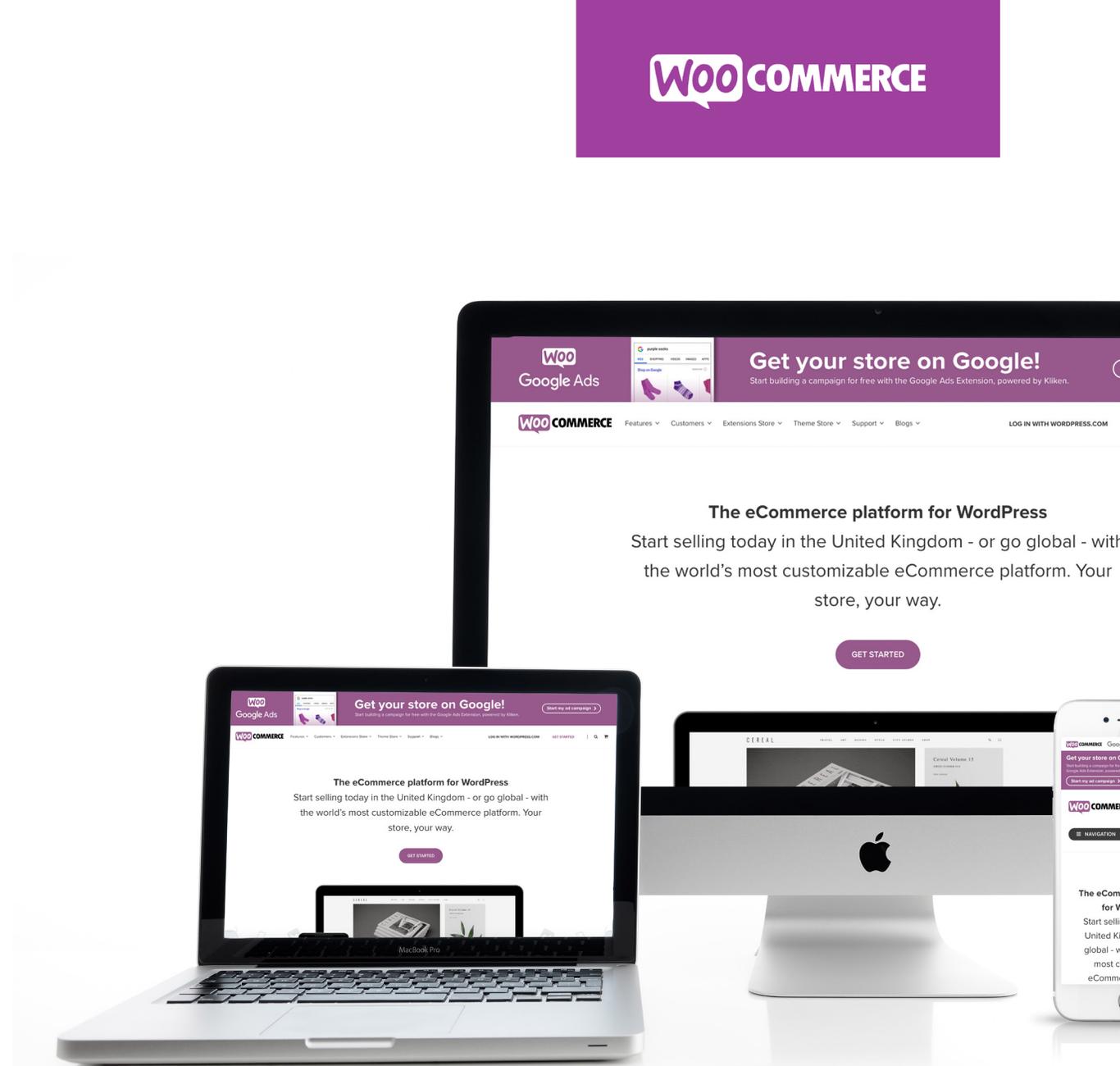
WooCommerce

Overview

WooCommerce is a free, open source shopping cart platform that works exclusively with WordPress websites.

Despite being less than ten years old, it already accounts for 35% of the eCommerce web share with an estimated three million active users.

Below, we've explored the strengths and limitations of WooCommerce to help you decide whether or not it's a good fit for your business.





Ease of use

If there's one thing that makes WooCommerce a little bit different to the likes of Shopify, EKM Power Shop or Magento, it's that it uses the WordPress content management system – WordPress.org.

Do keep in mind though that this is an open source solution and differs from WordPress.com, meaning you'll need to take care of your hosting, site security and domain name registration.

Despite this, WooCommerce is one of the easiest open source platforms to get to grips with and is more user-intuitive than solutions such as Magento, which requires a higher level of technical knowledge.

In fact, WooCommerce makes it easier for users to get started, by taking you through a simple seven-step process, which includes sorting your hosting out there and then with trusted partners.

Once you have secured web hosting, domain name, activated WooCommerce and picked out a storefront layout, then WooCommerce is easily comparable to the likes of Shopify or BigCommerce when it comes to using the software on a daily basis.





Time to market

The time it takes to get your WooCommerce business up and running depends on two things: your ability and the approach you've decided to take. If you're looking to install a theme and are familiar with WordPress, then you may find it takes around a week or less.

If you're not familiar with WordPress and have limited technical knowledge, then you may find this process takes you anywhere from two weeks or more.

If you want to hire a professional web developer for a custom web design, then depending on the size and scope of your store, you may be looking at a timeframe of 1-3 months. Keep in mind that this is a general estimate based on our research.





Search engine optimisation

In terms of specific SEO features, WooCommerce benefits from WordPress' in-built SEO functionalities and third-party apps. It does not offer any additional SEO features, but provided you have sufficient knowledge or the time to learn, this shouldn't be a problem.

For example, WordPress comes with the ability to create static URLs known as permalinks, blogrolling and pinging.

One popular (and free) third-party plugin you can use is called Yoast. Yoast enables you to set up canonical URLs, which helps to avoid the penalty issue of duplicate content, as well as being able to create specific title and meta descriptions that appear in search results.





Additional marketing features

WooCommerce offers little in the way of additional marketing features, but it's worth keeping in mind that much of this has to do with the shopping cart software being open source – highly customisable and free to download and use.

That said, when a customer makes a purchase on a WooCommerce store, automated emails are sent to provide proof of purchase to the customer. These can be branded, and you could use the opportunity to add in information about current or upcoming products.

WooCommerce customers benefit from basic reporting and analytics to monitor profits and track orders, website traffic and any other growth trends. There is also the option of integrating Google Analytics for more detailed insight about your customers.

The WooCommerce marketplace offers extensions and integrations with various marketing platforms in mind, including email, reporting, social media and promotions. However, these may cost you extra and you'll need to factor in such costs.



Design

There are plenty of options for WooCommerce users when it comes to deciding on a theme for your online store. In fact, the flexibility and customisability of the open source eCommerce platform is one of the main reasons so many customers choose WooCommerce.

For starters, WooCommerce offers one free storefront theme to every user, which is built to the same standards as WooCommerce itself.

This storefront theme is responsive and offers an easy way for you to change the look and feel of your store through the WordPress editor. You can also buy a storefront powerpack bundle for \$69 (excluding VAT) which gives more control over customisation, better checkout processes and improved menu navigation.

As the eCommerce platform is operated through WordPress, anyone can create themes that work with WooCommerce and put them for sale on the web. That said, watch out for themes being poorly coded as this can damage your website or affect your extensions.

A good place to go for WordPress themes is ThemeForest, which allows you to check out user reviews before making a decision.

As WooCommerce is open source, there is also the option to pay for someone to create a bespoke storefront layout from scratch.

Depending on the size and scope of your online store, this could set you back in the hundreds or thousands, however it is something you are only likely to purchase once, so investing the time and money now may save you costs further down the line. After all, a well-designed store that customer trust is key for increasing sales and scaling your business.



Extensions and integrations

Where WooCommerce really comes into its own is through its marketplace. With almost three hundred extensions available for customers to use, there are plenty of options for adding extra functionalities and evolving your online store.

Given that the platform is open source, you have the option to create your own plugins or pay to have them created for you. This high level of customisability is often why customers choose to go with WooCommerce.

Their extensions range from being free to install and use, to costing approximately \$250 per year (excluding VAT) for a single store. If you own multiple stores and want the same extensions for each, then this will cost you more.

It's important to understand that many WooCommerce plugins you pay for are not one-off costs but recurring annual fees. Another thing to be aware of is that you will need to pay an annual fee in order to accept credit cards (PayPal and debit card payments remain free).

Many reviewers point out that this yearly cost adds up quickly, even though the platform itself is free to download and use. According to WooCommerce, business owners that use the eCommerce platform have an average of fifteen plugins per store, six of which are specific to WooCommerce.

If you're comparing WooCommerce with BigCommerce or other hosted eCommerce platforms, you may find it a good idea to work out the annual cost of selling on hosted eCommerce platforms plus add-ons and compare it with the price of WooCommerce plugins you'll need to buy.



Customer support

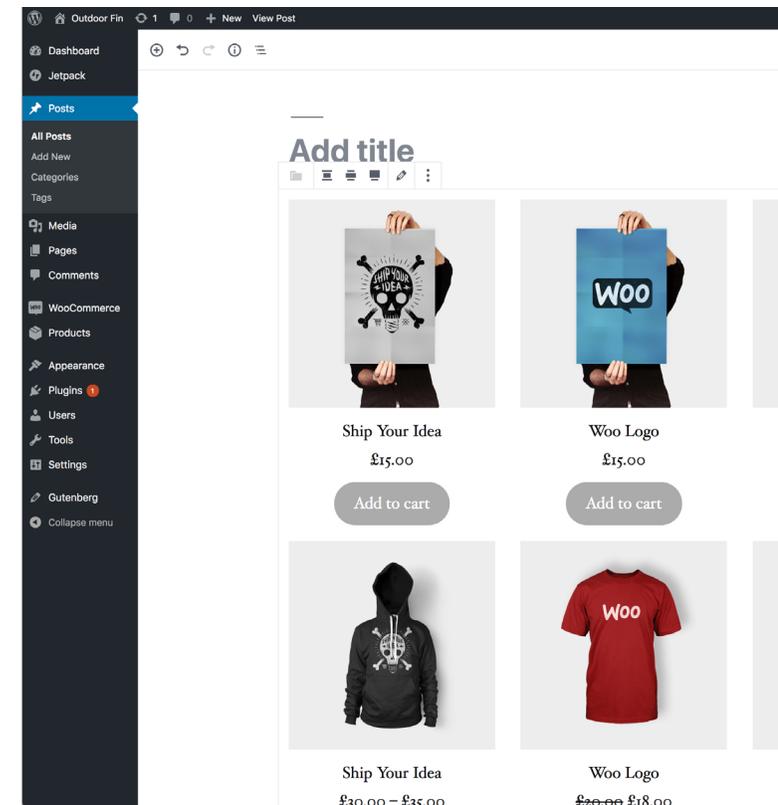
WooCommerce users have three options for getting support; an on-site FAQ section for basic or common issues, a support ticket system for more technical questions and a form submission for pre-sales questions.

There is no phone support or direct email address, nor is there a customer service-related social media channel. If you think you'll need regular customer support, then WooCommerce may not be the best solution for you.

That said, WooCommerce does provide its users with a free user account to access, post and comment on its WooCommerce forums. This means you can expect to receive a level of support from the WooCommerce community.

As many customers point out on Capterra, much of WooCommerce's support comes by way of online community forums. This may be a hassle if you prefer one-to-one service.

If you do encounter a big problem and need it resolved straight away, then there are external WordPress and WooCommerce experts available to help you – in exchange for payment.





Online resources and community

WooCommerce provides a lot of online resources for its users to learn how to use the eCommerce platform, including documentation, a getting started guide and guided video tours.

They also operate two blogs; one that details all software updates and another that answers common problems that WooCommerce business owners run into.

Several other organisations and individuals also offer training and support for WooCommerce and WordPress. For example, WP101 is a fast way to get to grips with WordPress and they have a specific WooCommerce video course suited to beginners.

There is also a large and active online community of people – developers, business owners and professionals – that discuss all things WooCommerce on a daily basis. Although WooCommerce is lacking in customer support, this community often makes up for it.



Pricing

WooCommerce is free to download and use – but this doesn't mean it's not going to cost you anything. There are several ongoing costs, many of which we've already covered, that you'll want to keep in mind when drawing a conclusion about the eCommerce platform.

These include:

Web hosting: For small businesses with few products, a shared hosting plan that sets you back £5-15 per month could be a good fit, but as you scale you will need a dedicated server or a Virtual Private Server (VPS) which will be an ongoing, monthly cost.

Storefront layout: An effective and attractive storefront layout is worth its weight in gold. This is a one-off cost that can have a big impact on how successful your store is. You can use the free theme provided, but for a premium theme allow between £50-250.

Domain name registration: This is likely to be a recurring annual payment. Don't get pulled in by adverts – you don't need to pay more than £10 a year. Look at sites like Name Cheap.

Plugins and extensions: Depending on what you want, these range from costing nothing to costing hundreds of pounds per extension. It's worth researching your options and deciding what you're likely to use in the future to work out if you can afford what you want

Web design services: If you're after something bespoke in terms of design, then you may be looking into hundreds if not thousands of pounds. This completely depends on your needs and is difficult to attach a price tag to.



Scalability

As WooCommerce is open source software, there are a number of factors that will affect your store's ability to scale – and not all are directly related to WooCommerce.

For example, you are responsible for your website hosting. This can have a big impact on the amount of website traffic your online store can handle. Finding a host that can handle large amounts of traffic is key to scaling your store successfully.

You may find that you need to purchase several extensions and plugins for your online store as you grow. These costs can add up and the more plugins you add, the more clunky your site may become, and it may not load quickly or be able to handle large amounts of traffic.

Keep in mind that WooCommerce does not provide a way to sell on marketplaces (such as Amazon or eBay). If you want to synchronise your inventory across multiple marketplaces and maintain full control of your business, then you will need to invest in third-party system.

To scale with WooCommerce successfully, you will need to make an investment in your team so that it is unaffected in performance and speed. If you don't have employees with sufficient development knowledge, this may be an expensive process but a necessary one.

Overall, WooCommerce is a fairly solid eCommerce platform to build a business from the ground up.

At some point, you will need to hire a developer to scale your business properly, but in comparison to other open source eCommerce platforms,

WooCommerce is – in our opinion – one of the most user-friendly and scalable ones out there.



Conclusion

Ultimately, the best eCommerce platform for your business will depend on your goals, needs and your capabilities. Only you can decide which eCommerce platform best suits your business – unless you're paying an experienced professional for guidance.

While there are platforms that better address certain needs over others, they all have different limitations and may be less suitable in other respects. All reviewed platforms tailor themselves to particular businesses, much like you tailor your store to your customers. The best thing to do is to sit down and create your own specification checklist.

By now, you should have a much better understanding of some of the top eCommerce platforms available to you. Hopefully, you will have found this eCommerce platforms comparison guide helpful in finding the right solution to grow your business.

Good luck on your journey.



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